T H E P O E T A N D T H E C I T Y

the city as a theme in English
poetry of the nineteenth century

by

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SUMMARY

This study examines the treatment of the city as a subject in nineteenth century English poetry. There is an outline of some of the problems posed by urban subject-matter in the post-Romantic era together with a survey of attitudes to the city, literary preconceptions and the kind of terminology already available at the beginning of the period. The body of the thesis shows how approaches developed, and considers how far poets were able to create forms and a language capable of dealing with this subject.

It was not one which inspired great poetry; most poets found the material intransigent. A major reason for this was the complex set of reactions produced by the presence of the urban crowd. The poet's response to the city is seen to depend largely on his response to the crowd and this study has therefore taken into account the reaction of poets to social developments in the course of the century.

The thesis deals with poetry in which the city or aspects of life in the city is the main subject. Poets for whom the city was only an occasional subject, e.g. Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning, have not been included although this study should throw some light incidentally on their treatment of urban themes.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND SOME PRECONCEPTIONS

I

T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land is sometimes considered to be the first city poem written in English, and Eliot is credited with doing what he said Baudelaire had done, using 'imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis' and elevating it 'to the first intensity - presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent much more than it is -' thus creating 'a mode of release and expression for other men.'[1] But when Eliot acknowledges the influence of certain nineteenth century English writers on his own work, and when we discover that the Victorians wrote a great deal of urban poetry, particularly in the eighteen-nineties, it becomes tempting to see Eliot as culminating rather than inaugurating a tradition of poetry of the city. The 'Preludes', 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night, and The Waste Land seem to have been anticipated in some way by works like James Thomson's City of Dreadful Night, John Davidson's 'Thirty Bob a Week' whose 'dingy urban images' Eliot has acknowledged as an influence[2] and the mass of urban verse written during the fin de siècle in more or less conscious imitation of Whistler's paintings and Baudelaire's 'Tableaux Parisiens'. And yet I think that to see The Waste Land as the first important city poem is not altogether a mistake. All through the nineteenth century there is a sense of uneasiness with urban subject matter, a scarcity of any real confrontation by the poet of his material in a way that would compare with Wordsworth's presentation of the external world of Nature, or with the direct impact of urban experience on the sensibility that we afterwards find in Eliot or the poets of the 1930s.

It is not that nineteenth century poets were unaware of the city as material for poetry. Like insistent but constantly frustrated prospectors they would assert time and time again that there were rich veins of poetry in the city if only they could be found. They did so in opposition to the belief, sometimes stated, sometimes just assumed, that the city is essentially prosaic, or worse, inimical to poetry. The debate intensified as those who asserted the latter view became more eloquent and influential and the city itself more seemingly intransigent as a subject; Ruskin, Carlyle and Morris could point to the world around them of blackened buildings and human degradation, and insist as Ruskin frequently did, that 'You can't have art where you have smoke'. The argument was never quite resolved, the assertions recur with the same force in almost every decade after 1850. Arthur Hugh Clough declared in 1853 that he was prone to believe that Pindus and Parnassus were no longer the 'lawful haunts of the poetic powers', but that these were 'if anywhere, in the blank and desolate streets, and upon the solitary bridges of the midnight city.'[3] In 1860s and 1870s, Robert Buchanan one of the poets who attempted the subject most earnestly acknowledged that 'Streets are not beautiful, and this is the age of streets' similarly of trade, railways, educational establishments, poor houses, debating societies, but, he says, 'if we strip off the hard outer crust of these things, if we pass from the unpicturesqueness of externals to the currents which flow beneath, who then shall say that this life is barren of poetry?'[4] In a poem dated October 1887 Arthur Symons rejected the idea that Art was enshrined apart from human life, saying

> Seek her not there; but go where cities pour
> Their turbid human stream through street and mart[5]

and John Davidson argued at the turn of the century, 'It is not now to the light that "the passionate heart of the poet" will turn. The poet is in the street, the hospital. He intends the world to know it is out of joint.'[6] By the time Davidson was writing those words there had in fact been a considerable amount of poetry specifically concerned with the city, ranging from the light verse of Frederick Locker-Lampson's very popular London Lyrics to the realism of Robert Buchanan and Charles Mackay, the phantasmagoric City of Dreadful Night by James Thomson and the many 'impressionist' lyrics of Davidson's contemporaries in the 1890s. And yet the tone of Davidson's argument as it proceeds shows that he feels the poet has yet to come to grips with the city as a subject.

There can be no doubt that the city presented considerable problems to the poet, especially in the post-Romantic era. This study attempts to show some of the ways in which poets tackled these, but first it is necessary to understand what the problems were.

II

In the industrial era the phenomenon of the growing city made an impact which was traumatic in the strongest sense of the word. Building was rapid, disordered and ugly, housing an increasingly crowded population. The city became a 'wilderness' or 'jungle', no longer the centre and symbol of civilisation's ordered harmony but the apparent embodiment of all chaos and misery. To poets in the eighteenth century, the world of nature had seemed at various times to be monotonous, savage, formless, threatening; in the nineteenth century the wilderness was the town.[7] At the beginning of this period, in one of the rare moments when a poet confronted the city

directly we are given a sense of the horror it created in physical and moral terms. Blake's 'London' was to anticipate the experience of many of the later poets:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street,
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
>
> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.
>
> How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
> Every blackning Church appalls;
> And the hapless Soldier's sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls.
>
> But most through midnight streets I hear
> How the youthful Harlot's curse
> Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.[8]

We are aware, here, not only of the blackened walls, the chimney sweeps and harlots, but of the narrator's own isolation. His lack of real communication with the people he passes is expressed in 'every face I meet'. Meeting faces comes to indicate a lack of meeting the person behind the face. Later Tennyson wrote of '... the squares and streets, / And the faces that one meets,' and Eliot developed the image in Prufrock's 'Time to prepare a face to meet the faces that one meets.'

The streets and buildings and the 'faces' of the city were only part of a larger problem. Romanticism made certain demands on the poet which added to the difficulties of writing about the city. One of its most important developments was to establish that the relationship between man and the external world was as important and

interesting as the world itself. But the very nature of the city seemed to work against such a relationship, threatening the new, very delicately held openness, which the poets were both explaining and presenting directly. The city itself assaulted the sensibility. At the same time it made active receptivity almost impossible, for the poet's means of response was inadequate, he lacked the language to realise the world which now confronted him. And as important as the relationship between man and the world of phenomena was that between man and man. In the city the threats to this were horrifyingly evident. Instead of a coherent whole, rationally ordered, the city began to offer a disconcertingly fragmented experience. Walter Bagehot, in an essay on Dickens whose talent he considered especially well-suited to the subject, wrote in 1858:

> London is like a newspaper. Everything is there and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person in some houses; but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of 'births, marriages and deaths'.[9]

Wordsworth has given a clear account of the ways in which the harmonious interrelationships he has found in the natural world are disrupted by the city. In Book Seven of The Prelude he records how he first contemplated the city as he would any other scene

> pleased
> Through courteous self-submission, as a tax
> Paid to the object by prescriptive right,

but shows how gradually the temptation to misrepresent or evade the scene becomes harder and harder to resist. In his 1850 revision he rearranges the introductory lines in which he explains that he is about to describe the appearance of the place, and instead, begins with a dramatic invocation of the object:

Rise up thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain
Of a too busy world!

and goes on to describe the 'endless stream of men and moving things' in a passage which combines a sense of monotony with a confusing assault on the senses. Again, people have become faces:

the quick dance
Of colours, lights and forms; the deafening din;
The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
And all the tradesman's honours overhead.

His experience of the city is a process of immersion into and escape from the crowd.

Meanwhile the roar continues, till at length,
Escaped as from an enemy, we turn
Abruptly into some sequestered nook,
Still as a sheltered place where winds blow loud!

The crowd is at one time 'a slackening tide', later 'the thickening hubbub'. In all this, usually only the more vivid, alien races stand out, those who are obviously Italians, for instance, or Jews. But one figure, that of a blind beggar is singled out as the emblem of the man in the crowd. The poet's sense of his own ignorance of his fellow men in the mass is epitomised by 'the fixed face and sightless eyes' of the beggar who carried the only clue to his identity on a label. I quote a passage of some length here to show fully how the crowd is distanced and in some sense reduced at this point to become a backcloth for the figure singled out:

As the black storm upon the mountain top
Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so
That huge fermenting mass of human-kind
Serves as a solemn background, or relief,
To single forms and objects, whence they draw,

For feeling and contemplative regard,
More than inherent liveliness and power.
How oft amid those overflowing streets,
Have I gone forward with the crowd and said,
Unto myself, 'The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery!'
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
Until the shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indication, lost
Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten
Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
His story, whence he came, and who he was.
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
As with the might of waters; an apt type
This label seemed of the utmost we can know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
As if admonished from another world.

He goes on to dwell briefly on more appealing recollections of the city, its peace at dawn or at night when the streets are empty, but then rejects these as 'falsely catalogued' and forces himself to return to the true nature of the object, for,

things that are, are not
As the mind answers them, or the heart
Is prompt or slow, to feel.

And he works out in his grapplings with the subject, a process similar to that whereby he confronts and then retreats from the full experience of the city in his wanderings in the crowd. The most

unnerving moments, those which cause the poet to shrink away from what he sees, are the occasions when the crowd is at its most vital:

> What say you, then,
> To times, when half the city shall break out
> Full of one passion, vengeance, rage or fear?
> To executions, to a street on fire,
> Mobs, riots, or rejoicings.

As an example he gives St. Bartholomew's Fair in which the normal sense of disorder and disorientation is exaggerated. In order to describe it, and it is something 'that lays / If any spectacle on earth can do, / The whole creative powers of man asleep!', he desires the Muse to place him <u>above</u> the scene. But even from this distance the impact is considerable:

> What a shock
> For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din,
> Barbarian and infernal, - a phantasma,
> Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound!

He then describes the individual components of the scene, all perversions of humanity, 'This parliament of monsters', and the spectators as fodder for a machine:

> Tents and Booths
> Meanwhile as if the whole were one vast Mill,
> Are vomiting, receiving, on all sides,
> Men, Women, three-years' Children, Babes in arms.

He concludes by defining this scene as the epitome of life as it is in the city for most of its inhabitants, where the breaking down of true relations between man and man, and between man and his surroundings, the lack of harmony and proportion have a debilitating effect on the mind:

> Oh blank confusion! true epitome
> Of what the mighty City is herself
> To thousands upon thousands of her sons,

Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning and no end -
Oppression, under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.

Wordsworth has given one of the fullest accounts of the experience of the city and its impact on the mind.[10] His observations were to be repeated by other writers in the course of the century. From The Prelude we learn that city streets afford an ugly and confusing spectacle and that the reaction of a sensitive mind is to retreat. But the unpleasantness of the experience is less in the topographical features at this stage than in the disturbing presence of the crowd or mass, and the withdrawal is from this crowd. The withdrawal may take the form of a physical retreat as when he slips into quiet squares and alley ways, or of a blurring of focus, as when it becomes a background for individual figures, or of an imagined removal to a point above, as the only position from which it can be described. Wordsworth shows that the poet's creative activity is inseparable from this process; he has to make an effort of the will to force his mind to bear on the subject before him. The poet's sensibility, faced with this material, instinctively retreats.

Wordsworth has isolated one of the essential problems of almost all nineteenth century urban poetry - the crowd. It is this which accounts to a large degree for the inability of poets to come to terms with the city as poetic material. The very few meditative lyrical poems are written when the streets are empty - Wordsworth's best-known celebration of the city was inspired by Westminster Bridge very early in the morning, when the crowds are still asleep,

Tennyson writes about it at daybreak, Charles Mackay meditates on rows of sleeping houses. A high proportion of the city poetry of the eighteen-nineties is set at night when the place is transformed. And yet a full account of life in the city in the industrial age has to take the crowd into account, whether it is given as the essential background to the lives of individual people, or presented as a subject in itself, as in Wordsworth, Robert Buchanan, Charles Mackay and John Davidson. The relation of the people in the crowd to each other, and the poet's relation to <u>them</u> gives us an important gauge to the poet's response to urban subject matter as a whole. In the majority of cases the writer sees the people in the crowd as being at odds with one another, while he for his part is cut off from them. The city-dweller is presented as alienated, both from his physical surroundings and from his fellow men. There are numerous precedents in the work of nineteenth century writers for Eliot's crowd flowing over London Bridge, where 'each man fixed his eyes before his feet' in the London crowds as described by the poets as well as by prose-writers like Engels, Dickens, Poe, Hardy, Gissing and others. Walter Benjamin has noted how the crowd in Poe's story 'A Man of the Crowd' has produced certain grotesques, people whose mannerisms are caused by the constant buffetting of other people, their unnatural appearance reflecting the distortion of natural human relationships.[11] Engels, another outside observer was struck by the strangeness of London as a phenomenon of apparently unlimited size, and by the de-humanising effects of life in its over-crowded streets. Like Wordsworth he is concerned with the impact of this environment on Man's moral and social well-being:

> The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels.

> The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellant and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extremes.[12]

How does the poet react in this situation? In general the natural recoil of any man's mind from this material, the sort of response described by Wordsworth is made stronger by a recoil on a social basis. In the course of the century a word becoming commonly used for the crowd was the 'mass'. This would be described as 'murmuring', 'seething', 'muttering' and the sense of distaste communicated by most middle-class writers gave way to a more nervous feeling at some potential threat. The class background of many poets writing about the city made it inevitable that they should feel separated from the urban mass, and a conscious effort has to be made to overcome a revulsion from the city as poetic material, not

only for aesthetic reasons as Wordsworth shows so clearly, but al for social reasons. Writing about nature, the poet did not have take any particular social stance; in the city it was sometimes unavoidable.

The demands made by the subject are thus very complex ones, and the alienating effects of the material made it particularly difficult to cope with. A certain sense of isolation could be useful for the poet, enabling him to see the world without being oppressed by it, providing the psychological state in which objec became symbols. In this respect it was rather like the mild, 'wh melancholy which poets have cultivated from Elizabethan times onwards. But extreme alienation, like stifling black melancholy <u>accidie</u> had the opposite effect, dulling or stifling the responses causing the poet to search desperately for some way out or, at worst, to give up writing completely. It was inevitable that in such circumstances lyrical or descriptive poetry about the city would be rare.

The connection between the social role of the poet and the degree to which he could give a realistic presentation of the city is examined more fully in the chapters which follow. There is evidence that the growth of a certain kind of urban poetry runs parallel to the development of poetic realism in the nineteenth century. When Eliot praises Baudelaire for elevating his imagery to 'the first intensity - presenting it as it is, and yet making i represent something much more than it is' he seems to be defining the realism which stems out of Romanticism, but which had a very uncertain flowering in the Victorian era. It required the right relation between the poet's vision and the concrete world, avoidin mere naturalism on the one hand and on the other the obscurities o

transcendentalism. Realism in this sense was defined by Robert Buchanan as 'the gift of realising in correct images the truths of things as they are.'[13] In spite of all the evasions, the lengthy introspections and mythologising which characterise so much of the verse of the period, this kind of realism persists, however spasmodically throughout the century. Holbrook Jackson, in his study of the eighteen-nineties notes the tendency towards the presentation of the truth, however exotic the literary and artistic way of life: 'In literature this tendency was called Realism, in the graphic arts it was called Impressionism. In this book I have called it the search for reality. That search was the culmination of all the activities and changes of the nineteenth century.'[14] When the subject was the city, the demand for accuracy of presentation together with the need to find sense or meaning in the material was again one greatly to tax the resources of the poet.

III

To 'realise correctly in correct images' the truth of the city meant finding a language to express what many writers seemed to find inexpressible. Ruskin complains of this problem when trying to describe a lane which was once part of the country and has now become little better than an urban refuse dump:

> Often, both in these days and since, I have put myself hard to it, vainly, to find words wherewith to tell of beautiful things; but beauty has been in the world since the world was made, and human language can make a shift, somehow, to give account of it, whereas the peculiar forces of devastation induced by modern city life have only entered the world lately; and no existing terms of language known to me are enough to describe the forms of filth, and modes of ruin that varied themselves along the course of [illegible]ne.15

But if the 'peculiar forces of devastation induced by modern city life' were new, cities as such had existed almost as long as language itself. Poets coming to the nineteenth century city did have terms, however inadequate, with which they could attempt the subject. This vocabulary was based on certain assumptions and values with which the material was inevitably assessed before bei presented in words and images.

The nineteenth century debate as to whether or not the city was appropriate subject-matter for poetry was a continuation of t more long-standing debate which underlies almost all poetry on th subject, i.e. which is the better of the two, the more conducive what can broadly be termed The Good Life. Classical sources for this debate, Horace and Juvenal, were probably less strong for mo English writers than the religious works, The Bible, and The Pilg Progress with which many of them grew up. When Man first sinned, according to the Book of Genesis, he was cast out of the garden i which he had been innocent and happy, and into the world. When Cain was turned from the presence of God for the first sin agains another man the first thing he is recorded as doing is building a city to name after his son. Cowper's aphorism 'God made the count man made the town' was only an echo of what many had learned in church or at the parental knee. The names of cities in the Old Testament are associated with vice, Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain where there was not one virtuous man to save the city Babylon, the scene of the writing on the wall. The gateway to the promised land was the destruction of Jericho. In the New Testamen Christ had to go alone into the wilderness to contemplate and pray Much of his preaching was beside lakes and on mountain sides. Ov Jerusalem he wept; he also went into it to die.

From The Pilgrim's Progress which to many became a second Bible, the argument against the city could be continued. The Celestial City could be balanced against the City of Destruction from which Christian set out, but neither has as much resemblance to a real city as had the town which contained Vanity Fair:

> And as in other fairs of less moment there are the several rows and streets under their proper names, where such and such wares are vended, so here likewise, you have the proper places, rows, streets (viz. countries and kingdoms), where the wares of this Fair are soonest to be found ...
>
> Now these pilgrims as I said, must needs go through this Fair: well, so they did; but behold, even as they entered into the Fair, all the people in the Fair were moved, and the town itself as it were in a hubbub about them; and that for several reasons: for,
>
> First the pilgrims were clothed in such kind of raiment as was diverse from the raiment of any that traded in that Fair. The people therefore of the Fair made a great gazing upon them: Some said they were fools, some they were bedlams, and some 'They are outlandish-men.'[16]

The association of buying and selling with vice is far older than Bunyan; we might recall the cleansing of the temple in the New Testament, or passages in Piers Plowman and Dante's Inferno. But the terms in which the poet expresses it may owe a good deal to Vanity Fair. Wordsworth records the rapid sequence of impressions,

> the string of dazzling wares,
> Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
> And all the tra desmen's honours overhead,

as part of the hubbub from which he was trying to escape. Lamb, writing in 1802, felt the need to defend his taste for such scenes in these terms:

> The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me. The endless succession of shops where Fancy miscalled Folly is supplied with perpetual gauds and toys excite in me no puritanical aversion.[17]

A distaste for the city is more directly expressed in another part of The Pilgrim's Progress. Mr. Greatheart and Mercy, in Part II come to the Valley of Humiliation where they rest. It is an ideal pastoral spot, fulsomely described in its beauty and fertility.

> 'But we will come again to this Valley of Humiliation. It is the best, and the most fruitful piece of ground in all those parts. It is fat ground, and as you see, consisteth much in meadows; and if a man was to come here in summer-time, as we do now, if he knew not any thing thereof, and if he also delighted himself in the sight of his eyes, he might see that would be delightful to him. Behold, how green this Valley is, how beautiful with lilies.'

That is how Mr Greatheart speaks of it. Mercy appreciates it as a place for contemplation, and contrasts it with the distracting noise of the city:

> Then said Mercy, 'I think I am as well in this Valley as I have been anywhere else in all our journey: the place methinks suits with my spirit. I love to be in such places where there is no rattling with coaches, nor rumbling with wheels: methinks here one may without molestation be thinking what he is, whence he came, what he has done, and to what the King has called him.'[18]

The city was the place where vice was at its thickest, where the lures of the world were most dangerous, and where the general noise and activity prevented a man from thinking about God. The country fostered the virtues of simplicity, unworldliness and contemplation. The idea of the city as a place where a young man from the country

may go to seek his fortune and there fall into evil ways is so widespread as to need little illustration. Wordsworth's Michael is typical, where the son 'in the dissolute city gave himself / To evil courses.'

The city as it really was, at street level, became increasingly reviled for moral and aesthetic reasons. But the city as a symbol, the idea of the city had a continuing history as a receptacle for man's religious and social ideals. In the course of the Old Testament we find Jerusalem becoming the centre of the Jewish religion, built and rebuilt as a worthy place for the Tabernacle, as the Holy City. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews twice refers to the idea of a city built by God. When expounding the faith which inspired the great figures of the Old Testament he explains, 'By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.' And later, 'For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.'[19] When St John had his apocalyptic vision of the passing away of the old earth at the end of the world, he saw the City of God as a New Jerusalem. His description of the City becomes so much part of imaginative stock that I shall quote it fairly extensively:

> And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more

pain: for the former things are passed away. ...

... And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was like a stone most precious, even like a jasperstone, clear as crystal; and had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates and at the gates twelve angels ... And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the Glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it, And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.[20]

The imagery of this passage has pervaded the imagination and its details are evoked many times in English writing, from the medieava poem Pearl to the poems of the 'nineties. In popular mythology the streets of London were to the fortune seeker paved with gold. In The Pilgrim's Progress, Christian eventually reaches the Celestial City which has most of the characteristics of the New Jerusalem in Revelation with the added delights of sounding trumpets and pealing bells. The dreamer is given a brief glimpse into the city:

Now just as the gates were opened to let in the men, I looked in after them; and behold, the City

> shone like the sun, the streets also were paved with gold, and in them walked many men with crowns on their heads, palms in their hands, and golden harps to sing praises withal.

In poetry of the city the terms with which the New Jerusalem was s vividly realised were often used as a metaphor for the earthly cit at its best. Any city with spires and towers catching the sun ear in the morning or in the evening when the light was golden and the windows glittered like jewels might evoke images of the city in Revelation. There are elements of this in most panegyrics on the city from the 'In Praise of London' ascribed to Dunbar, to Henley'; 'Scherzando' in London Voluntaries. To see the city in this radia light the poet had to turn his gaze away from jostling humanity, looking down on it from a hill like Thomson in The Seasons, or seeing it early in the morning like Wordsworth or, if he was standi in the town itself, by lifting up his eyes away from street level to the spires and towers. There towering above the humdrum roofs c shops and houses were those buildings which expressed man's civic and religious aspirations. The contrast between the celestial sigh above and the 'Inferno' of life in the street is represented by John Davidson in 'The Exodus from Houndsditch' where there is a vision in which the city is actually transformed into two parts:

> Above the street the Holy City hung,
> Close as a roof and like a jasper stone
> Lit by the Lamp of God; while seraphs sung
> And saints adored the Throne.
>
> Beneath, the sewers, flaming suddenly,
> Bore down, like offal, souls of men to swell
> The reeking cess-pool of humanity,
> The hideous nine-orbed Hell.

The New Jerusalem provided more than a visual inspiration. One feature of its description in the Book of Revelation is the harmony among the people there, the absence of hostile forces. Th place promised social tranquillity and good, as well as delights t the eye. To Blake and his contemporaries the coming of the New Jerusalem meant a social order in which all the ills of present city life would be done away with. The late eighteenth century wa a time when the zeal of the Millenarial movements contributed to the cause of social change and one influential leader, Richard Brothers actually drew up a street plan of the New Jerusalem![21] For Blake, Jerusalem was to be created out of London which would become a perfect city for Universal Humanity.

Throughout European civilisation we find that even while the deplored the vices of actual city life, writers had conceived of the greatest social good in terms of a city. Both Christianity an Humanism strove for the New Jerusalem or the Perfect Society and this conception of the city co-exists with the more satiric, realistic descriptions of the city as the seat of vice. In James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-30) the poem 'Autumn' extols the growt of the city as the centre of 'cultivated life / In order set'

> Nurse of art, the city reared
> In beauteous pride her tower-encircled head;

even though a little later it reserves the happiest place for the man who lives the quiet rural life. But then in 'Winter' the Horatian delights of winter in the country are contrasted with the febrile life of town where

> The sons of riot flow
> Down the loose stream of false enchanted joy
> To swift destruction.

and the passage goes on to mock the fopperies of the court. By the

nineteenth century in England the City had taken over from the Court as the centre of the empire and the wealth of the ruling classes came to be spent on public and commercial buildings which were both useful and necessary and at the same time symbolic of progressive social achievement. But as the nineteenth century metropolis developed it became horrifyingly evident that instead of creating a Celestial City on earth they were creating an Inferno.

References to the city as Hell are abundant, from Shelley's 'Hell is a city much like London' to Davidson's allegory quoted above or his 'Thirty Bob a Week' clerk's rueful notion,

> 'So p'raps we are in Hell for all that I can tell,
> And lost and damn'd and served up hot to God.'

Popular conceptions of Hell as a place of heat and sulphurous fumes and of extreme deprivation both physical and spiritual would have seemed uncannily appropriate to the actual city in certain areas at certain times of day. But more sophisticated explorations of the Inferno also seemed to have their reflection in the features of contemporary London. Among the best-loved providers of images was, of course, Dante. The Divine Comedy became very popular with nineteenth century readers. It was published in English versions by no less than twenty-one different translators (if we count two in the 1890s who got no further than Hell!). The Rev. H. F. Cary's translation, first published in full in 1814 was the most popular, running into seventeen editions, with Longfellow's coming next with eleven editions between 1867 and 1893. Cary's translation was issued with engravings by Gustave Doré in the 1880s and '90s.

No nineteenth century poet felt as deeply about London as Dante did about Florence. For at the heart of all his invective against the frauds, cheats and swindlers who have degraded his

native city is a belief in its inherent goodness, a devotion to it which compares with nothing in the English literature of place except perhaps John o'Gaunt's speech on England. In the Paradiso when he tells how Florence must have been before it became corrupted from within and polluted from without by alien blood, he writes as of a family or individual. One of the most chilling images is of cities which for some reason or other have become empty and therefore 'dead'

> See Luini and Urbisaglia where they sleep,
> Dead cities both. (Paradiso, XVII, 73)

When Hell is described, La Citta Dolente, it is referred to as in direct contrast with the City of God. It might seem strange that the Paradiso provides no specific description of the New Jerusalem along the lines of the Apocalypse as in Pearl or The Pilgrim's Progress. Instead we have the planets, the eagle and finally the Celestial Rose. And yet though it makes no visible appearance, the idea of the city seems to be so fundamentally there as not to need stating and at the climax of the description of the Rose's architecture, Beatrice turns to Dante and says,

> Behold our city and all its gyres!
> (Paradiso, XXX, 130)

But it is for his images of Hell that the poet of the city would have owed a debt to Dante. And it is in relation to him that we see most clearly a common feature of modern city poetry - the use of a reversed image. When Dante wanted to describe Hell he used some of the most vicious images provided by the city as he knew it, and reinforced these by an imaginative combination of such realistic elements with others closer to fantasy. The nineteenth century poet, his eyes fixed on the temporal world did not see it as providing him

with emblems of the eternal. Instead he used the stock of religious imagery as metaphors for the real world. This is of course a common enough process observable from the end of the Renaissance and through the Enlightenment, but in searching for vocabulary to describe the city the poets were aware that this was in many ways new and therefore strange material calling for a more daring use of language. It became a rather a habit with the city poets particularly after about 1870 to 'reverse metaphors' to describe the secular in terms of the spiritual, the realistic in terms of the imaginary or fantastic, the outdoor urban landscape in terms of the indoor and artificial and so on. It was almost as though in a very modest way the city was gradually affording a new kind of 'poetic licence' until such bold images as Davidson's city-dweller being 'served up hot to God' or Arthur Symons's 'Your eyes are empty streets where men have passed' become increasingly common, particularly in the context of urban poetry. No early reader of 'Prufrock' acquainted with the urban poetry of the fin de siècle could have been as shocked as we sometimes imagine by Eliot's 'While the evening is spread out across the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table.' In the nineteenth century city the poet would have seen before his eyes sights which the Inferno had predicted, as though Dante's imagined vision of hell had come true. The citadel of Dis or Satan as described in Canto VIII uses similes of furnace and iron to create the impact of something horrifying and fantastic. But the industrial city as it was appearing on the landscape of England presented this kind of sight in reality:

> 'See my son! it now draws nigh,'
> Said my good lord, 'the city named of Dis,
> With its sad citizens, its great company.'

> And I: 'already I see its mosques arise
> Clear from the valley yonder - a red shell,
> As though drawn out of glowing furnaces.'
>
> And he replied: 'The flames unquenchable
> That fire them from within this make them burn
> Ruddy, as thou seest, in this, the nether Hell.'
>
> We now were come to the deep moats, which turn
> To gird that city all disconsolate,
> Whose walls appeared as they were made of iron.
>
> (Inferno, VIII, 67-78)

Dante also drew on and exaggerated the city as he knew it, describing for example, the movement of the crowds in Hell as being like the two-way traffic system developed in Rome for the Jubilee (Inferno, XVIII, 25-33). Inside, Dante and his guide cross bridges as over the river in any city, people cough with fumes from a pit described as being like a sewer and the most damned are seen scrabbling about in the excrement. To those poets writing when the Health and Sanitation researches of the 1840s were receiving the greatest publicity, a comparison of London to Dante's Inferno would have seemed appropriate (Inferno, XVIII). But it is not only the topography of the Inferno which might have seemed to anticipate the worst pollutions of the industrial city, the damned themselves are also frighteningly recognisable. Sometimes there are jostling crowds pushing past each other, some drift aimlessly with no idea where they are going, others are trudging monotonously through one or other of its endless circles. At the same time Dante will give these people some physical attribute to symbolise their damnation, some grotesqueness which makes them perversions of the natural human form, such as blindness or, as in the case of the Hoarders and Spenders who jostle against each other, the characteristic of

'facelessness' so that none can be distinguished from the other. From the vivid descriptions of the city's inhabitants by Wordsworth and Engels quoted above we can imagine how Dante's allegory might have influenced those who read him, seeing all round them such manifestations of human life as he had reserved for the damned in Hell. In the course of the century the comparison would have been reinforced by the work of the engraver Gustave Dore, whose illustrations for Dante and Milton would have invited comparison with his later original renderings of London from first-hand observations.[2]

The classical influences, particularly those of Horace and Juvenal were probably drawn on less by nineteenth century writers than in earlier centuries, particularly in the Augustan era. But eighteenth century translators and imitators of Juvenal's Third Satire did establish certain attitudes to the city which later writers inherited. Boswell remarked on the imitations of it by Johnson, Boileau and others as proof 'that great cities, in every age, and in every country, will furnish similar topics of satire.'[22] There are versions of the poem by Oldham, Dryden, Gay and Johnson, and its spirit is to be found in Swift, Pope and Goldsmith. Gay's Trivia, which is only loosely based on Juvenal was immensely popular for decades after its publication in 1717.

Juvenal's Third Satire combines descriptions of street life, buildings, stalls, crowds etc. with sharp social satire particularly against the contrast so vividly observable in the city between the rich and the poor. Juvenal is leaving Rome, he says, because of the competition, corruption and opportunism of life there, because the noise of the streets keeps him awake at night, because of the dangers of fire, drunkards, burglars and cut-throats, especially at night. In all this, he continually observes that the rich are

well-protected against danger and discomfort, the poor on the other hand are vulnerable to mockery, to the loss of the little they do possess, to the pressures of the crowd and to the hazards of travelling the streets at night, unprotected, Disillusioned though he is, however, the poem is exuberant and in places humorous, and there is no suggestion that the city is so appalling or oppressive that he has no taste for writing about it.[23]

We tend to associate eighteenth century writers more with the enthusiasm for the city expressed by Pope, as in the 'Epistle to a Young Lady leaving Town after the Coronation', or Johnson's famous, 'When a man is tired of London he is tired of life.' And the appeal of an environment of which it can be said 'All human life is there' seems particularly strong for the age which believed that mankind was a subject of abounding interest. But the moral sentiments which the plight of the poor in the city aroused in Juvenal also found expression in writers of the time. Goldsmith in 'The Deserted Village' enumerates the contrasts between the rich and poor and picks out the example of a destitute woman who has suffered in the city. Once she led a healthy village life, now:

> Now lost to all; her friends, her virtue fled,
> Near her betrayer's door she lays her head,
> And, pinched with cold, and shrinking from the shower,
> With heavy heart deplores the luckless hour,
> When idly first, ambitious of the town,
> She left her wheel and robes of country brown.

At the same time, also perhaps under Juvenal's influence, we find renderings of certain physical aspects of the city, as in Swift's 'A City Shower' or Pope's Dunciad, where the devotees of Dulnesse find appropriate setting in the geography of London:

This labour past by Bridewell all descend,
(As morning pray'r and flagellation end)
To where Fleet-ditch with disemboguing streams
Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames,
The king of dykes! than whom no sluice of mud
With deeper sable blots the silver flood.

In general, though, the many imitations of Juvenal suggest not so much indignation as a delight in the excuse to write about the life of town. Johnson's 'London' seems to lack bite and in Gay's Trivia the satire is far milder than in Juvenal. Gay dwells more on street scenes, celebrating rather than judging the city's noise and colour. This celebratory note, too, found its way into the city poetry of the nineteenth century.

IV

Some idea of how the city presented itself to the Victorian poet and of the terms he used to express it can be gained from examining some poems of Tennyson. Tennyson has been chosen not as the self-confessed 'second-rate sensitive soul', but because he combines an awareness of intellectual issues and the world around him with a craftsman's concern for the medium in which he is working.

In one section of In Memoriam we learn that Tennyson and Hallam were themselves involved in the current debate about the city. Hallam took the view, already observed in Wordsworth, that distinctions and identities become submerged in the city:

But if I praised the busy town,
He loved to rail against it still,
For 'ground in yonder social mill
We rub each others' angles down,

'And merge,' he said 'in form and gloss
The picturesque of man and man.'

Tennyson's view would have been closer to that of the Augustans or their imitators the Smith brothers and Frederick Locker-Lampson, but the death of Hallam changed it for him. His recoil from the town was part of his recoil from the company of men in general. In these celebrated stanzas the city becomes a landscape of despair:

> Dark house, by which once more I stand
> Here in the long unlovely street,
> Doors, where my heart was used to beat
> So quickly, waiting for a hand,
>
> A hand that can be clasped no more -
> Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
> And like a guilty thing I creep
> At earliest morning to the door.
>
> He is not here; but far away
> The noise of life begins again,
> And ghastly through the drizzling rain
> On the bald street breaks the blank day. *

'The antiphonal voice to In Memoriam', according to an account by his son,[24] was Maud. Here the presentation of the city is even bleaker. It has been suggested that the social denunciations in the poem 'sprang from his long talks with Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice about the terrible conditions in the rapidly growing industrial cities.'[25] If so, a nightmare of reality had combined with the poet's own suffering to create the protagonist's disordered consciousness, It finds expression in stifling images of the city:

> Then I rise, the eavedrops fall,
> And the yellow vapours choke
> The great city sounding wide;
> The day comes, a dull red ball
> Wrapt in drifts of lurid smoke
> On the misty river-tide.

* In Memoriam, section VII, Ricks ed. pp. 870-871.

Thro' the hubbub of the market
I steal, a wasted frame,
It crosses here, it crosses there,
Thro' all that crowd confused and loud,
The shadow still the same;
And on my heavy eyelids
My anguish hangs like shame.

Later his loathing of the town spreads to its inhabitants. He feels estranged from them by their indifference and his own.

But the broad light glares and beats,
And the shadow flits and fleets
And will not let me be;
And I loathe the squares and streets,
And the faces that one meets,
Hearts with no love for me:
Always I long to creep
Into some still cavern deep,
There to weep, and weep, and weep
My whole soul out to thee. (Maud, Ricks pp. 1085-1086)

Again in In Memoriam the city appears in a bad dream. It is the very negation of Nature's goodness and hope. The symbolism here is strongly anti-urban; the crown he brings from Nature into the city is despised and rejected. The sense of the city's ugliness and evil here, together with the verse rhythms, recalls Blake; the situation is like that of the pilgrims in Vanity Fair:

I dreamed there would be spring no more,
That Nature's ancient power was lost;
The streets were black with smoke and frost,
They chattered trifles at the door:

I wandered from the noisy town,
I found a wood with thorny boughs
I took the thorns to bind my brows,
I wore them like a civic crown.

I met with scoffs, I met with scorns
From youth and babe and hoary hairs:
They called me in the public squares
The fool that wears a crown of thorns. (In Memoriam LXIX Ricks p. 920..

Later, when the poet begins to gain some acceptance of his loss, he returns to the scene of his earlier despair. We might expect that now he will have come to terms with the city, to find in it some character in keeping with his new mood, but the only way he can show his happier state is to bring Nature into the city:

Doors where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, not as one that weeps
I come once more, the city sleeps;
I smell the meadow in the street;

I hear the chirp of birds, I see
Betwixt the black fronts, long with-drawn
A light blue lane of early dawn,
And think of early days and thee. (In Memoriam CXIX Ricks p. 970)

As a landscape of hope the city fails him. In Tennyson's work the balance between the outer and inner worlds allows us to chart the development of the city as 'objective correlative'. The actual details of the mid-Victorian city - the fog, the dull sun, the lurid smoke - make up the outside world. At the same time the poet's inner mood which is one of lonely grief is aggravated by the sense of isolation from the rest of society which the city inflicts on him. In his work we can see clearly the process whereby the city tended to become the appropriate landscape for a particular state of mind.

The Bible, Dante, The Pilgrim's Progress, translations and imitations of Juvenal all helped to make up the stock of literary attitudes to the city and provided the rudiments of a vocabulary

to describe it. But how were poets to cope with the city as it was becoming, with what Ruskin called 'the peculiar forces of devastation induced by modern city life'?

I hope to give some idea to what extent poets rose to the challenge of the subject in creating a language to express it and to examine what stylistic approaches they found useful or even necessary. We shall see how the problems of ugliness and the presence of urban crowds affect the manner of presentation and try to establish how far there could be said to have developed an 'urban aesthetic'.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. T. S. Eliot, 'Baudelaire', Selected Essays (London, 1949) p.426.
2. In the preface to John Davidson, A Selection of his Poems, ed. Maurice Lindsay (London, 1961).
3. Arthur Hugh Clough, 'Review of some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold', North American Review, July 1853, and in Prose Remains, edited by his wife (London, 1888).
4. Robert Buchanan, in an essay 'On my own tenatives', published in David Gray and Other Essays, Chiefly on Poetry (1868) and repeated in the essay 'On mystic realism' in the third volume of Poetical Works (London, 1874).
5. Arthur Symons, Prologue to Days and Nights (London, 1889).
6. John Davidson, A Rosary (London, 1903), quoted Lindsay, p.53.
7. See Asa Briggs, Victorian Cities (London, 1963); also Dyos and Wolff (eds.), The Victorian City - Images and Realities (London, 1973).
8. William Blake, 'London', Complete Writings, Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), (Oxford, 1969), p.216.
9. Walter Bagehot, National Review, October 1858; Collected Works, Norman St. John Stevas (ed.), (London, 1965), Vol. II, p.87.
10. William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Bk. 7; Poetical Works, Ernest de Selincourt (ed.), (Oxford, 1961).
11. Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Illuminations, Hannah Arendt (ed.), (London, 1970), p.173.
12. Frederich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England 1844, in Marx and Engels on Britain, (Moscow, 1962), p.57.
13. Robert Buchanan, 'On Mystic Realism', op.cit., p.317.

14. Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, (London, 1913), 1931 edition, p.271.

15. John Ruskin, 'Scott', Nineteenth Century, June 1880, in 'Fiction Fair and Foul', Works, Cook and Wedderburn (eds.), (London, 1903-12), Vol. 34, p.266.

16. John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, Roger Sharrock (ed.), (London, 1965), p.125-6.

17. Charles Lamb, 'The Londoner', 1818 text, first printed in The Morning Post, 1 February, 1802.

18. Bunyan, op.cit., pp.289, 291.

19. Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 11, verses 9, 10, Chapter 13, verse 14, Authorised Version.

20. The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Chapter 21, verses 2-27.

21. See Morton Paley and M. Phillips (eds.), William Blake (essays for Keynes), (Oxford, 1973).

22. Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso, in the Penguin translation by Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (1949, 1955, 1962).

23. Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, 2 vols., (London, 1906), I, p.65.

24. Juvenal, Third Satire, Loeb edition (London, 1912).

25. See Christopher Ricks (ed.), The Poems of Tennyson, (London, 1969), p.1039.

26. Ibid., p.1039.

CHAPTER TWO

POPULARISERS

> Lover of London! whilst thy feet
> Haunted each old familiar street,
> Despite life's pain.
> We fume and fret and, when we can
> Cry up some new and noisy plan,
> Big with the Rights and Wrongs of Man:
> And where's the gain?

These lines are from Lionel Johnson's poem 'Lamb', published in 1891. Lamb's reputation as a lover of London maintained a constant growth with the repeated publication throughout the century of his essays and letters. Here Johnson acknowledges Lamb's all-embracing acceptance of the London he knew, and also, by implication, his resistance to ideas of social change. It was his enthusiasm for the city, combined with his conservatism which helped to establish a particular genre of London poetry in the nineteenth century. Lamb's circle, contemporaries like the Smith brothers, and later admirers like Frederick Locker-Lampson, celebrated London in light verse characterised by urbanity, humour and social complacency. Their work includes Horace in London (1813), a joint effort by James and Horace Smith, London Lyrics (c. 1810) by James Smith on his own, a number of poems by forgotten writers appearing in magazines, and the highly popular London Lyrics (1857) of Frederick Locker-Lampson. Their main characteristic, and the one which probably most accounts for their popularity, is an air of nostalgia. At a time of great changes in the landscape and social constitution of the city they look back to the London of Pope and Johnson as to a Golden Age.

Lamb's contribution was in prose, but written in such terms as to establish an attitude to London which made it a fit subject for poetry. His influence and popularity were considerable, with editions of his work appearing every five years or so until the 1880s; then there was a marked increase during that and the next decade. To some extent Lamb was reacting consciously against the pastoral bias in Romanticism, creating in its place a Romantic enthusiasm for the city. For him, nostalgia for the eighteenth century was an essential ingredient in this process. In many ways it seemed that the essence of urbanity had resided in those days. In the painting and literature of the period he found precedent and justification for depicting the city; he had prints by Hogarth on his walls and wrote an enthusiastic essay in defence of the artist's subject matter.[1] He possessed a copy of the Art of Living in London (1768) by James Smith, which he believed to be by Goldsmith. Lamb and his friends cultivated certain aspects of eighteenth century life, chiefly its urbanity, a certain gentlemanly, Horatian reflectiveness, a laisser-faire approach to social conditions and the development of an aesthetic attitude which had already begun to appear by the late eighteenth century. It would take a thesis in itself to trace developments in the poetry of the city in that period, but a brief account should help to show some of the tendencies picked up by the early poets of the nineteenth century.

James Smith's The Art of Living in London was one of a large number of works in both prose and verse devoted to urban life. Others include Ned Ward's The London Spy (1698-1709), poems by Pope and Swift in imitation of Horace, Johnson's London, John Gay's Trivia (1716) and other updated versions of Juvenal, Charles Jenner's Town Eclogues (1772), and numerous poems by lesser-known

writers on life in London. It was a theme for poets of both the street and the study; the subject of a 'visit to London', for example, was to be found in verses based on Horace's 'Visit to Brundisium' and in anonymous popular verse relating the adventures of a visitor to the city, often a country bumpkin as for example in 'The Great Boobee' which is an excuse for setting incidents in London in places of interest.[2]

Gay's Trivia: or The Art of Walking the Streets of London, like most of the others laid claim to being social satire or a useful handbook, a vade mecum or eighteenth century Time Out. The topographical description is always related to his useful social purpose, but much of the appeal of the work must have been in the vivid evocation of town life. These lines from Trivia, part of a passage advising the reader on what kind of shoes to wear as winter approaches, capture the atmosphere of the city in Autumn in clear notations of sound and vision:

> When the black youth at chosen stands rejoice
> And clean your shoes resounds from every voice;
> When late their miry sides stage-coaches show,
> And their stiff horses through the town move slow;
> When all the Mall in leafy ruin lies,
> And damsels first renew their oyster cries:
> Then let the prudent walker shoes provide,
> Not of the Spanish or Morocco hide;[3]

But here as elsewhere when Gay describes the sound or appearance of the city it is not long before he returns to his true subject. The external world is interesting for the way it relates to the world of men, in Gay it is usually measured in terms of the comfort or discomfort it provides.

Trivia was first published in 1716. A later writer, Charles Jenner shows a shift in emphasis. His Town Eclogues, dated 1772

(bound in the same BM volume as Goldsmith's Deserted Village) is more self conscious about the urban subject matter, as the title would suggest. Eclogue III reflects on a mother's wisdom in keeping her daughter in town when she makes the vulgar error of falling in love:

> Love flies from cities; tell me, ye who know,
> Is genuine love the produce of Soho?
> Can Almack's boast such tender, constant swains
> As weep in tufted groves, or sigh on plains?
> So ill these scenes Love's pensive raptures suit,
> He comes not here but sends his substitute;
> A spurious brother with a coarser name,
> May serve full well, to raise a guilty flame;
> Or vile self-int'rest forge a golden chain,
> To bind the prudent nymph and careless swain;
> Whilst many a maiden flutters through her prime,
> Nor thinks on love, because she has not time.

Already the country is associated with the 'higher' passions; the town with the 'lower'. All the Town Eclogues are based on the common assumption that the town is inferior to the country, being a place of vapid and worthless pleasures. 'The Court Chaplain' tells of a country clergyman making this discovery; 'Time Was' satirises two men 'sick of this confounded town' grumbling about the price of bread which they put down to the pretensions of the rising middle-class tradesmen and apprentices wanting to behave like gentlefolk. The most interesting, 'The Poet', tells of one who, trying to make a living out of poetry, has to satisfy the bookseller by writing 'a past'ral for the Magazine'. But in the countryside surrounding London he finds no inspiration, for things have changed since Pope, Phillips and Gay wrote their pastorals.

In vain, alas, shall city bards resort,
For past'ral images, to Tottenham-court;
For droves of sheep, consign'd from Lincoln fens,
That swearing drovers beat to Smithfield penns,
Give faint ideas of Arcadian plains,
With bleating lambkins, and with piping swains.
I've heard of Pope, of Phillips, and of Gay,
They wrote not past'rals in the king's highway:
On Thames smooth banks, they fram'd the rural song,
And wander'd free the tufted groves among;
Cull'd ev'ry flow'r the fragrant mead affords,
And wrote in solitude, and din'd with lords.
Alas for me! what prospects can I find
To raise poetic ardour in my mind?
Where'er around I cast my wand'ring eyes,
Long burning rows of fetid bricks arise,
And nauseous dunghills swell in mould'ring heaps
While the fat sow beneath their covert sleeps.

This poem is interesting not only for its realistic description of the town encroaching on the countryside, but also for the confidence with which the poet can satirise the popular demand for the pastoral and invert it, producing instead straight description of the appearance of the town.

Included in the Town Eclogues is one called 'The Visionary' which had previously been printed elsewhere. It tells of a man who wanders away from the noise of the town to indulge in musings which have nothing to do with the town; the poem becomes in fact a praise of Fancy, anticipating in many respects the early work of Keats.

Oft have I seen him at the close of day,
Shun the broad street, and steal his cautious way
Through silent alleys to his lov'd resort
In some dull garden of the inns of court.

Again the poetic experience, the delicate sensibility is shown as needing to escape the city. Charles Jenner appears to be

emphasising that urban experience is inimical to reflection and contemplation, in fact to poetry. Yet out of this contention, he makes poetry, fully aware of the paradox.[4]

Lamb continues the debate, and extends the possibilities of urban subject matter. His essay 'The Londoner', first printed in The Morning Post for 1802 is a passionate declaration in favour of the town and its crowds. He opens by confessing 'an almost insurmountable aversion from solitude and rural scenes' but admits that this was suspended for a short time when he was in love. Like Jenner he calls on the popular association of love, poetry and the pastoral:

> Every man while the passion is upon him, is for a time at least addicted to groves and meadows and purling streams. During this short period of my existence, I contracted just familiarity enough with rural objects to understand tolerably well ever after the poets, when they claim in such passionate terms in favor of a country life.

Anti-romantic though this may seem, Lamb is in fact embuing with Romantic enthusiasm something which to his predecessors was simply a question of economic circumstance - the town was where they made their living - or, at the most, a matter of taste and custom. Lamb echoes the sentiments of Dr Johnson but his vocabulary betrays his time. He talks of 'feasting his passion', feeding his 'humour' in a manner similar to that of Keats in 'Ode on Melancholy'. His approach to crowded streets is not the witty account of how best to make one's way through them as it was in Trivia and its contemporaries, but an overflow of 'unutterable' feeling:

> This passion for crowds is nowhere feasted so full as in London. The man must have a rare recipe for melancholy who can be dull in Fleet-street. I am

> naturally inclined to hypochrondria, but in London it vanishes like all other ills. Often when I have felt a weariness of distaste at home, have I rushed out into her crowded Strand, and fed my humour, till tears have wetted my cheek for unutterable sympathies with the multitudinous moving picture which she never fails to present at all hours, like the scenes of a shifting pantomime.

For Lamb the crowd was the essential Romantic animating force, to correspond to the more elemental forces which other poets found in Nature. He goes on to defy certain conventions of taste and conscience, making his stand in the great debate about the city. The established image of the city as vice - as Sodom and Gomorrhah or Babylon, or as Vanity Fair - had by Lamb's time been reinforced by the belief that poverty and squalour were both aesthetically and morally displeasing. The note of discordance threatened chaos and a danger to the sense of form and harmony; it also troubled the conscience. Even those literary men who could close their doors to the reverberations from the French Revolution or the Gordon riots, would find in the pages of Juvenal's English imitators the contention that the city fostered social injustice and also made it markedly visible. Lamb does not close his eyes to all this - he maintains that such scenes are themselves picturesque. It was a case where the apparently progressive approach aesthetically was also the socially reactionary, a phenomenon which will be observed again later in the century. Lamb was attempting to do for the social wilderness of London what painters and poets were doing for the wilder aspects of the natural world.

> The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me. The endless succession of shops where Fancy miscalled Folly is supplied with perpetual gauds and toys

> excite in me no puritanical aversion. I gladly behold every appetite supplied with its proper food. The obliging customer, and the obliged tradesman - things which live by bowing, and things which exist for homage - do not affect me with disgust; from habit I perceive nothing but urbanity, where other men, more refined, discover meanness: I love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision.[5]

In claiming aesthetic respectability for the less decorative aspects of the city, Lamb could point to his prints of Hogarth. In his essay, dated 1811, on 'The Genius and Character of Hogarth' he argues that it is a fallacy to 'confound the painting of subjects in common or vulgar life with the being a vulgar artist'. He explains that it is the quantity of <u>thought</u> in Hogarth's work which 'unvulgarises his subject, and it is the 'cold' spectator who finds himself disgusted.

> Let us take the lowest of his subjects, the print called <u>Gin Lane</u>. Here is plenty of poverty and low stuff to disgust upon a superficial view; and accordingly a cold spectator feels himself immediately disgusted and repelled. I have seen many turn away from it, not being able to bear it. The same persons would perhaps have looked with great complacency on the celebrated picture of the Plague of Athens. Disease and Death and bewildering Terror in <u>Athenian garments</u> are endurable, and come, as the delicate critics express it, within the 'limits of Pleasurable sensation'. But the scenes of their own St Giles's, delineated by their own countrymen, are too shocking to think of.[6]

Just as in 'The Londoner', Lamb here stresses the power of the mind or feelings to transform the material; there he had loved 'the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision'. For Wordsworth and Coleridge the natural world was

susceptible to the animating power of man's mind; Lamb is claiming the same susceptibility for the city.

It may appear that a strong case is being made for actuality, the here and now, even that Lamb is establishing a new aesthetic. This is true only to a limited extent. He wished to receive and communicate the animating force of the city as other Romantics did of nature, but the essential force of the city in Lamb's time was dynamic - physical changes and social developments were proceeding very rapidly. The London of Hogarth and Dr Johnson was already passing, not only in appearance, but in the way in which it could be viewed. Lamb's nature and personal circumstances made him resistant to change and the London he wished to evoke was already almost gone. Hence the note of nostalgia. His famous essay on chimney sweeps shows a loving concern that 'these young Africans of our own growth - these almost clergy imps, who sport their cloth without assumption' may continue to 'preach a lesson of patience to mankind.' And in an essay on beggars which prompted a reply from Thomas Hood, he writes:

> The Mendicants of this great city were so many of her sights, her lions. I can no more spare them than I could the Cries of London. No corner of a street is complete without them. They are as indispensable as is the Ballad Singer; and in their picturesque attire as ornamental as the signs of old London.[7]

Lamb's notion of the picturesque is what is long-established and familiar to him personally. In a life which had enough in the way of personal turmoil, the solid features of the city provided reassurance and warmth. The threatening aspects of the crowd appeared to have been successfully quashed. What other writers before and after tended to shun for social or aesthetic reasons,

Lamb grasped with the simple reflex of a child:

> Nursed amid her noise, her crowds, her beloved smoke, what have I been doing all my life, if I have not lent out my heart with usury to such scenes![8]

Lamb suffuses the city with sentiment and provides his readers with a reassurance in the face of what was often disconcerting or threatening. If the actual city was changing, Lamb's evocations of it re-established it as so many of them wanted it to be. It was probably in his response to the crowd, and to those disturbing figures who stood out from it - beggars and chimney sweeps - that he offered the greatest comfort. In his 'unutterable sympathies with the multitudinous moving picture' which the crowded Strand presents Lamb did for his followers what Baudelaire and the French Impressionists were to do for their later admirers among urban poets - he provided a strongly felt, vividly presented acceptance of what was otherwise troubling and confusing.

There is a cultivation of London's past in Leigh Hunt's The Town which first appeared in 1835 in a series of monthly essays entitled 'The Streets of London'. This consists of a ramble around the town observing certain places which are of interest for the history they reveal. The 'Advertisement' claims that these papers were accounted by all who read them 'to be among the pleasantest and most interesting of the Author's writings.' One reader had observed that 'Leigh Hunt has illumined the fog and smoke of London with a halo of glory, and peopled the streets and buildings with the life of past generations'.[9]

The circle which included Lamb and Leigh Hunt extended to Keats who in turn spent evenings with Horace Smith and occasionally,

his brother James. It was after a visit to the Mermaid Tavern with Horace Smith and other 'wits' that Keats wrote his lines on the Mermaid Tavern, evoking a golden past in the urbane and humorous vein which indicates an affinity with Lamb and the Smiths. In fact, Keats found the gentlemanly atmosphere generated by this group in which constant witticisms about society were de rigeur rather too fine for his taste. It was after an evening spent with this set that he wrote:

> they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect of enjoyment - These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating and drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter.[10]

The quality which Keats remarked on is reflected in the town poetry of the Smith brothers. This consists largely of vers de société in which the urban scene is a setting for light, social satire, or, often, a delighted self-satisfaction. The kind of readers whose tastes and expectations they were catering for is nicely summed up by Coleridge when he describes the people he would not have expected to respond to the Lyrical Ballads:

> The men of business who had passed their lives chiefly in cities, and who might therefore be expected to derive the highest pleasure from acute notices of men and manners conveyed in easy, yet correct and pointed language; and all those who, reading but little poetry, are most stimulated by that species of it, which seems most distant from prose, would probably have passed by the volume altogether.[11]

If they passed by Lyrical Ballads they would probably have picked up Horace in London. Written by both the Smith brothers and

published in 1813 this was a set of imitations of Horace adapted to contemporary London, very much in the manner of eighteenth century writers. These lines from 'The Jilt' are typical:

Chamber'd in Albany, I view
On every side a jovial crew
Of Benedictine neighbours,
I sip my coffee, read the news,
I own no mistress but the muse,
And she repays my labours.

There is a note of fashionable Bohemia in a poem, 'The Actress' in which a young man is urged not to be ashamed of being in love with a lady of that profession, looking forward to the poetry of Symons and others in the nineties. The sense of social stability felt by this circle is revealed in 'Hurly Burly' where the writer recalls the riots of thirty years before as a temporary aberration in society:

Oh fatal and disastrous year!
When oyster-vending dames,
Made London's train bands disappear,
And wrapped her walls in flames;
The chimney sweep assail'd the shop,
The 'prentice climb'd the chimney top,
Impunity made cowards bold:
While Plutus in his last retreat,
Stood trembling in Threadneedle Street,
And hugg'd his bags of gold.

We saw the mob, like Oceans' flood,
By howling tempests driven,
Assail the king's dragoons with mud,
And menace old St Stephen.
Again they rage, the bird is flown;
Sir Francis, aw'd by Whitbread's frown,
To father Thames commits his fate:
In secret the uxorious tide,
Safe bears him to the Surrey side,
To join his anxious mate.

But he feels no longer threatened. The Smith brothers write as though the Augustan era had never passed. One feature recalling the eighteenth century is the way in which the London setting is still only incidental to a reflection of a social or sentimental kind. 'New Buildings', for example contains lines of urban description:

> Saint Georges Fields are fields no more,
> The trowel supersedes the plough;
> Huge inundated swamps of yore,
> Are changed to civic villas now.
>
> The builder's plank, the mason's hod,
> Wide, and more wide extending still,
> Usurp the violated sod,
> From Lambeth Marsh, to Balaam Hill.[12]

But these are only to illustrate the Latin 'Jam pauca aratro jugera regia', to make the contrast between the frugality and thrift of great men in former times with the lavish living embodied in the buildings of the present.

The deliberate cultivation of eighteenth century manners is revealed in a biographical account of James Smith in which an acquaintance describes Smith's conversation:

> The droll anecdote, the apt illustration, the shrewd remark, a trait of humour from Fielding, a scrap of song from the Beggar's Opera, a knock-down retort of Johnson's, a couplet from Pope or Dryden, - all seemed to come as they were wanted.[13]

His London Lyrics (1810) anticipate the better-known volume of that name by Frederick Locker-Lampson. They are mostly concerned with polite gossip and upper-class manners in town, as the very titles indicate, including as they do, 'Christmas out of Town', 'St James's Park', 'The Upas of Marylebone Lane', 'Next Door Neighbours', 'The

Poet of Fashion'. Like Lamb he found tradesmen and workpeople interesting as far as they provided colour for the scene: these lines are from 'The Image Boy':

> Who'er has trudged, on frequent feet,
> From Charing Cross to Ludgate-street,
> That haunt of noise and wrangle,
> Has seen, on journeying through the Strand,
> A foreign Image-vendor stand
> Near Somerset quadrangle.
>
> His coal-black eye, his balanced walk,
> His sable apron, white with chalk,
> His listless meditation,
> His curly locks, his sallow cheeks,
> His board of celebrated Greeks,
> Proclaim his trade and nation.

The poetry of the Smith Brothers, famous in their time for puns and parodies, shows a delight in the town and its life as led by a fairly restricted circle of people. Like Lamb they were extending eighteenth century urbanity into their own time, though they were in many ways truer to the earlier period than was Lamb. They lacked his rhapsodic presentation of streets and crowds for the sake of atmosphere or the spirit of the city that seemed to breathe through them. They were no Romantics; as Keats said they 'say things which make one start, without making one feel.'

The London Lyrics of Frederick Locker-Lampson were for years the poems most readers would have mentioned if asked to name the poetry of London. Between 1857 and 1893, the book went into twelve editions, which were being revised by Locker-Lampson all the time. At first sight, the poems seem a direct continuation in the mode of the Smith brothers. They mostly concern 'society' and its habitat, Piccadilly, Rotten Row, St James's Street, 'The Pilgrims of Pall

Mall'. Many of them are arch and rather avuncular pieces making indulgent fun of the whims of upper-class young ladies, and there is a good deal of punning and word-play. This stanza from 'Piccadilly' gives an example:

> Now were I such a bride, with a slave at my feet,
> I would choose me a house in my favourite street;
> Yes or no - I would carry my point, willy-nilly;
> If 'no' - pick a quarrel; if 'yes' - Piccadilly!

But Locker-Lampson's tone is closer to humour than to wit, if we take the distinction used by Keats, and his favourite writers included Blake and Lamb. In the first edition of London Lyrics, the poem 'Piccadilly' had as motto, extracts from Lamb's 'The Londoner' printed thus:

> 'Often when I have felt a weariness or distaste at home, have I rushed out into her (London's) crowded Strand, and fed my humour, till tears have wetted my cheek for unutterable sympathies with the multitudinous moving picture. ... Nursed amid her noise, her crowds, her beloved smoke, what have I been doing all my life, if I have not lent out my heart with usury to such scenes?'

The two pieces picked out are those where Lamb immerses himself in the crowds. Like Lamb, Locker-Lampson is revelling in the city and its atmosphere and as in Lamb there is a strong air of nostalgia. Every other poem, whether it is directly dealing with the city or not, looks back to a more appealing past. These lines from 'Bramble-rise' show a fairly typical recoil from the evidences of nineteenth century 'progress':

> Where boys and girls pursued their sports
> A locomotive puffs and snorts,
> And gets my malediction;
> The turf is dust - the elves are fled -
> The ponds have shrunk - and tastes have spread
> To photographs and fiction.

In general, however, the regret is less over changes in landscape than for the passing of a social world, one more refined and aristocratic even than that inhabited by Locker-Lampson himself. These stanzas from 'Piccadilly' show this particular kind of nostalgia and the way in which Locker-Lampson can deliver a straightforward expression of love for the street he is writing of:

> The Street is still a lively tomb
> For rich, and gay, and clever;
> The crops of dandies bud and bloom,
> And die as fast as ever.
> Now gilded youth loves cutty pipes,
> And slang that's rather scaring;
> It can't approach its prototypes
> In taste, or tone, or bearing.
>
> I love the haunts of old Cockaigne,
> Where wit and wealth were squandered;
> The halls that tell of hoop and train,
> Where grace and rank have wandered;
> Those halls where ladies fair and leal
> First ventured to adore me!
> Something of that old love I feel
> For this old Street before me.

Sheer delight in a part of the city and its atmosphere characterises the first two stanzas of 'Piccadilly', and here Locker-Lampson picks out a visual detail, a recognisable 'urban image'. It is not a thing he does often, but it shows a willingness to accept and incorporate even such a modern feature as gas light, provided it is part of his mood and lends colour to the scene. In this respect he is a disciple of Lamb:

> PICCADILLY! Shops, palaces, bustle and breeze,
> The whirring of wheels and the murmur of trees;
> By night or by day, whether noisy or stilly,
> Whatever my mood is, I love Piccadilly.

> Wet nights when the gas on the pavement is streaming,
> And young Love is watching, and old Love is dreaming,
> And Beauty is whirling to conquest, where shrilly
> Cremona makes nimble thy toes, Piccadilly!

Like others of his predecessors in writing urban verse, Locker-Lampson cultivated an old-fashioned gentlemanly air. Austin Dobson recalls:

> He had besides something of an elder generation, a touch of the extinct bel air - that refined and reposeful amenity which has vanished before the strenuous life and obtrusive upholstery ...[14]

It was the reassuring Toryism of his work in a time of change that helped make Locker-Lampson so popular. There is nothing in it to shock or jar the sensibilities. A man could leave a copy in the drawing room without fearing for his wife and daughters who could find the verses only gratifying. There was nothing that a servant might find dangerously subversive, only the knowledge that the poet's whimsical speculations about women could occasionally extend to housemaids and seamstresses as well as those of his own class. He even shows a superficial sympathy, as these lines from 'The Housemaid' show:

> Wistful she stands - and yet resigned,
> She watches by the window-blind
> Poor Girl. No doubt
> The folk that pass despise thy lot:
> Thou canst not stir, because 'tis not
> Thy Sunday out.
>
> To play a game of hide and seek
> With dust and cobweb all the week
> Small pleasure yields
> Oh dear, how nice it were to drop
> One's pen and ink - one's pail and mop;
> And scour the fields.

The tone here establishes the extent and depth of the poet's sympathy - it is not profound, nor does it in any way threaten his understanding of the social order. Nevertheless Locker-Lampson did write after the 1840s, and however reassuring his verse to those who feared change, there is less absolute certainty about the status quo than in Lamb or the Smith brothers. The very fact that he includes a poem about a housemaid and in later editions 'The Stone-mason' indicates that the middle classes were feeling that they should at least look further afield than their own social sphere. As we shall see, in the course of the century even those most hostile to movements that might change the structure of society were unable to resist a trend in writing. It became fashionable, if nothing else to acknowledge the existence of the working classes. The only poem where Locker-Lampson muses in any depth on the poor is 'Beggars'. In this he is on his way to visit 'his Sophy', when he is accosted by a beggar selling combs. We may shudder not at the poverty of the man as presented here, but at the apparent indifference of the poet who appears only too eager to return to thoughts of his love:

> He eyes my gold chain, as if greedy to crib it;
> He looks just as if he'd been blown from a gibbet.
> I pause ... ! I pass on, and beside the club fire
> I settle that Sophy is all I desire.

When again he is approached, he passes on, but admits himself in a painful dilemma as to how he should behave:

> She begs, - I am touched, but I've great circumspection;
> I stifle remorse with a soothing reflection
> That cases of vice are by no means a rarity -
> The worst vice of all's indiscriminate charity.
>
> Am I right? How I wish that my clerical guide
> Would settle this question - and others beside.
> For always one's heart to be hardening thus,
> Is wholesome for Beggars, if hurtful for us.

When he arrives at Sophy's house she gives him a present, a paper-weight in bronze of a writhing lizard. He points out to her that a real lizard must have been tortured to produce this model, to which she replies that 'It was only their muscular movement you know!' The final stanza consists of a sombre reflection in which the poet compares his own reactions to the poor with the girl's lighthearted dismissal of suffering:

> Thinks I (when I've said au revoir, and depart -
> A comb in my pocket, a Weight - at my heart),
> 'And when wretched Mendicants writhe there's a notion
> That begging is only their "muscular motion."'[15]

But Locker-Lampson is less concerned here with presenting the poor than with examining his own attitudes, and as the next chapter will show, it was very little troubling of the conscience compared with that of other writers who were taking up urban themes.

The light poetry of the Smith brothers and Locker-Lampson kept the city as a subject alive in the nineteenth century in the face of a threatened pastoral takeover by poets under the influence of Wordsworth, Keats and Coleridge, and also in the face of developments which made the city seem unpromising both aesthetically and for moral reasons. These poets wrote with exuberance and confidence. They saw the city as colourful, picturesque and the appropriate setting for man at his most civilised and entertaining. The London of Blake might never have existed. Their attitude to the city continued unbroken into the latter part of the century, when it was overcultivated by Wilde and his contemporaries. It was urban poetry in a very restricted sense, and it seems more restricted as people's consciousness of the city opened out. Its themes were determined almost entirely by the environment of its readers.

Richard Muther's description of much pictorial art of the nineteenth century applies to poetry of this kind:

> And everything must be kept within the bounds of what is charming, temperate and prosperous, without in any degree suggesting the struggle for existence. The pictures have themselves the grace of that mundane refinement from the midst of which they are beheld.[16]

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Charles Lamb, 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', Life, Letters and Writings of Charles Lamb, Percy Fitzgerald (ed.), (1924), Vol. IV.
2. See W. H. Irving, John Gay's London, (Harvard, 1928).
3. John Gay, Trivia (1716), lines 23-30.
4. Charles Jenner, Town Eclogues, (1772).
5. Charles Lamb, 'The Londoner', op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 323-4.
6. Charles Lamb, 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 292.
7. Charles Lamb, 'A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis', op. cit., Vol. III, p. 320.
8. Charles Lamb, 'The Londoner', op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 324.
9. Advertisement to Leigh Hunt, The Town, 1848.
10. John Keats, Letters, Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), (Oxford, 1952), pp. 70-71.
11. S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, (1817), Chapter IV.
12. James and Horace Smith, Horace in London (1813).
13. 'Biographical Memoir', Memoirs, Letters and Comic Miscellanies in Prose and Verse of the late James Smith Esq., Horace Smith (ed.), (1840), p. xvi.
14. Austin Dobson, introduction to Frederick Locker-Lampson, London Lyrics, (1904 edition).
15. Frederick Locker-Lampson, London Lyrics, (1904 edition).
16. Quoted in Holbrook Jackson, op. cit., p. 269.

CHAPTER THREE

PROLETARIAN SYMPATHIES

Among the works in prose which popularised the London of a 'man about town' was Pierce Egan's Life in London 'or the day and night scenes of Jerry Hawthorn Esq. and Corinthian Tom ... With thirty-six scenes from real life, designed and etched by I. R. and G. Cruikshank, and ... designs on wood by the same artists.' This came out in book form in 1821 after a serial appearance the preceding year. It was followed closely by another edition in 1823, and as well as being adapted into a play in 1822 it was also made into a very popular musical extravaganza. Tom and Jerry's adventures take them into different parts of the city whose variety and entertainment value generates an air of exuberance in both text and illustrations. Thomas Hood recalls in his literary reminiscences an occasion spent in the company of Lamb and John Clare:

> Little wonder either, that in wending homewards on the same occasion through the Strand, the peasant and Elia, Sylvanus et Urban, linked comfortably together; there arose the frequent cry of 'look at Tom and Jerry!' for truly, Clare in his square-cut green coat, and Lamb in his black, were not a little suggestive of Hawthorn and Logic, in the plates to Life in London.[1]

Some years later, however, Hood would not have invoked this work so readily. In 1840 he wrote a sympathetic review of Dickens's Master Humphrey's Clock (now The Old Curiosity Shop), Dickens wrote to thank him, and when Hood wrote back explaining his personal pleasure in the book, he said:

> Some ill-chosen extracts when reached me abroad, with the rumour that one of the prominences was a stage coach-man and the other a Boots (what grammar!) led me to think that the Book was only a new strain of Tom-and-Jerryism which is my aversion.[2]

One of the points Hood made in the review was that Dickens understood the real nature of the different sides of London:

> It has been said that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives; an ignorance by the way, which Boz has essentially helped to enlighten; it is quite as certain that one half of London is not aware of even the topographical existence of the other;[3]

Dickens, too, rejected the culture of which Life in London was one expression and the poems of the Smith brothers another, both concerned to preserve the atmosphere of the eighteenth century. Writing to Douglas Jerrold in 1843, he said 'If ever I destroy myself it will be in the bitterness of hearing those infernal and damnably good old times extolled.'[4] The very vocabulary, 'infernal', 'damnably good' is an ironic comment on the upper-class idiom of those who extolled them. Clearly, a change in attitudes had come about by the time Dickens and Hood were corresponding. It was increasingly difficult for a sensitive mind to view the city with Lamb's rhapsodic pleasure; it had now become a widely acknowledged 'problem'.

The increase in urban population was one of the main factors. In 1840 town workers were nearly double country labourers in numbers. As recently as 1790 it had been the other way round.[5] Industrialisation in the cities of the north was matched by an increase in London not only of dock-workers, coster-mongers, chimney sweeps and other groups who were very approximately the social equivalent of

the factory workers of the north, but also by the huge class of clerks and other low-paid office workers whose lives depended on London's place as a port and mercantile centre. These people would live in dreary unplanned suburbs in conditions which if not as dangerously squalid and overcrowded as the new slums of Liverpool and Manchester were no less ugly and demoralising. The magnitude of the poverty and suffering of the urban poor in London and elsewhere touched the consciences of reformers, journalists, social historians and novelists. The world of the industrial north was presented in such novels as Harriet Martineau's A Manchester Strike (1832), Disraeli's Coningsby (1844) Sybil (1845), Mrs Gaskell's North and South (1855) Mary Barton (1848), Dickens's Hard Times (1854), and that of London in most of Dickens's other works at this period, and in Kingsley's Alton Locke (1850). Both industrial and urban workers were studied in the writings of Marx and Engels on England as well as by less influential, native writers such as William Cooke Taylor, author of Natural History of Society (1844) and Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Manchester (1842). It was the time of the Chartists and of the Anti-Corn Law League, and the conditions which produced Chartist militancy also moved sections of the middle-class to a position of radicalism. In 1841 Punch was established under the editorship of Mark Lemon. Among its founders was Henry Mayhew the journalist who was later to become famous for his studies of the London poor. Mayhew contributed to Punch for a while as did Douglas Jerrold another 'humanitarian', author of a novel of London life, St Giles and St James (1851). Punch was successor to the Comic Annual which Hood was editing during the 1830s but it differs in a way which reflects the tendency in middle-class consciousness at the time. For the

new magazine was not just another comic collection of jokes and puns, it was also satirical, usually at the expense of Toryism, and humanitarian in its concern with the sufferings of the poor. In the visual arts, the change can be noted in the emergence during the 1820s of John Martin who not only painted industrial scenes - towns, tunnels and factories - but also used some of the same motifs in his illustrations for Paradise Lost. In this way he made the connection between contemporary urban and industrial scenery and images of the infernal, a connection which was to be taken up later in the work of Gustave Doré.

Hood himself lived out the process of change. He began as a writer very much of Lamb's school. Under Lamb's influence he wrote an essay in The London Magazine called 'Sentimental Journey from Islington to Waterloo Bridge' in which the enthusiasm is, as Hood himself might have said, Lamb-like. It also draws on the all-class myth which Tom and Jerry helped to foster.

> Next to being a citizen of the world, it must be the best thing to be born a citizen of the world's greatest city ... A literary man should exult rather than otherwise that he first saw the light - or perhaps the fog - in the same metropolis as Milton, Gray, Defoe, Pope, Byron, Lamb and other town-born authors, whose fame has nevertheless triumphed over the Bills of Mortality. In such goodly company, I cheerfully take up my livery; and especially as Cockneyism, properly so called, appears to be confined to no particular locality or station in life.[6]

At the monthly dinners of The London Magazine which published Hood's prose and verse as well as employing him for a while, Lamb and Reynolds were of the company and Hood's work reflects the gentle whimsical humour we associate with this group. His facility with

puns made him famous for such poems as 'Faithless Sally Brown' and other light pieces in ballad form.

By the time Punch was established, however, Hood had changed. Lamb died in 1834, and in January the next year Hood's wife was severely ill while at the same time he came under increasing pressure from creditors. Eventually he had to escape abroad from his worsening economic situation. In The Comic Annual for 1835 his poem 'The Sweep's Complaint' gives an account of the sweep's conditions written in the first person, in the same publication a year later his 'Poetry, Prose and Worse' makes the case for poetry to extend its subject matter and be put to such purposes as to 'urge clemency on bailiffs'. Hood was experiencing first-hand some of the harsher side of Life in London, and although he saw better times later, this period of his life made his identification with the oppressed something deeper than a passing phase. In November 1843 there appeared an article in Punch, probably written by Jerrold, exposing the plight of a woman called Biddell who received sevenpence a pair for making a pair of trousers and who could, by working a fourteen hour day make at the most seven shillings a week. Two months later the Christmas number carried an anonymous poem, contributed in fact by Hood, called 'The Song of the Shirt'. With this poem, the scope of city poetry expands again to embrace the world which had been observed by Blake. It also does a great deal to restore realism: we note once again the presence of observed facts and concrete details which Crabbe and Wordsworth had rendered. Hood established an association between poetry on urban themes and poetic realism which was to continue through the century.

The poem was an immediate success. That month the circulation of Punch trebled. Lemon produced a dramatisation; the poem was

translated into German, Italian, French and Russian. It was acclaimed not only by the middle-class readership of Punch, but also by the class with which it was concerned. It was printed as a broadsheet, recited on street corners, set to music and sung in the streets and learnt by heart by those unable to read. In Germany and Russia as well as in England it inspired numerous imitations, popularising the poetry of social conscience.

'The Song of the Shirt' is a compelling poem; it is not difficult to understand its success. There is a strong rhythm and much repetition, and the verbal dexterity which made Hood such a skilful turner of puns has here produced some telling conceits, clearly and simply put:

'Oh! men with sisters dear!
Oh! men with mothers and wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creatures' lives!
Stitch - stitch - stitch,
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
Sewing at once with a double thread
A shroud as well as a shirt.

'But why do I talk of death!
That phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear his terrible shape,
It seems so like my own -
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep;
O God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!

'Work - work - work!
My labour never flags;
And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
A crust of bread - and rags.
That shattered roof, - and this naked floor, -
A table, - a broken chair, -
And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there.'

Later in the poem the sempstress thinks longingly of the country where she cannot go and work as she would wish. The poem forcibly conveys the woman's imprisonment, both in the physical details of the surroundings and by showing clearly the economic plight in which she is trapped. It would not have needed mention of her yearning for the countryside for the reader to know that the poem is set in the nineteenth century city.

In the early months of 1844, Hood published several poems of a similar nature including 'The Lady's Dream', which is designed to awaken the conscience of the rich, and a piece called 'The Workhouse Clock'. This he describes as an allegory, and it tells of the imagined gathering together of 'the Labouring Classes' to watch their Overseer setting the Workhouse Clock. They come from all parts of the town:

> Who does not see them sally
> From mill and garret and room,
> In lane, and court, and alley,
> From homes in poverty's lowest valley,
> Furnished with shuttle and loom -
> Poor slaves of Civilisation's galley -
> And in the road and footways rally,
> As if for the Day of Doom?

The poem is of particular interest for its presentation of the crowd. During this period a Leeds clergyman was prompted to warn against the danger of talking of 'the masses' thereby losing sight of individuals. Although Lamb had been able to plunge into the multitude in the Strand and experience a joyful exhilaration, William Cooke Taylor contemplating the industrial proletariat at this period shows considerable uneasiness:

> ... as a stranger passes through the masses of human beings which have been accumulated round the mills

> (in the populous northern industrial areas) he cannot contemplate these crowded hives without feelings of anxiety and apprehension amounting almost to dismay. The population is hourly increasing in breadth and strength. It is an aggregate of masses, our conception of which clothe themselves in terms which express something portentous and fearful.[7]

To Hood the crowd is 'them', but he sees himself speaking for them, interpreting what they stand for to the 'other nation'. The terms in which the mass is described conveys both the force of the crowd in the elemental imagery which was to become common - 'gushing, rushing, crushing', a 'torrent', 'a hurricane' and also a strong moral impulse, based on the recognition of the simple principle that men are born equal:

> Stirred by an overwhelming zeal,
> And social impulse, a terrible throng!
> Leaving shuttle, and needle, and wheel,
> Furnace and grindstone, spindle, and reel,
> Thread and yarn, and iron, and steel -
> Yea, rest and the yet untasted meal -
> Gushing, rushing, crushing along,
> A very torrent of Man!
> Urged by the sighs of sorrow and wrong,
> Grown at last to a hurricane strong,
> Stop its course who can!
> Stop who can its onward course
> And irresistable moral force;
> O! vain and idle dream!
> For surely as men are all akin,
> Whether of fair or sable skin,
> According to Nature's scheme,
> That human movement contains within
> A Blood-Power stronger than steam.

The final comparison linked the workers' movement with a feature of their world 'A blood power stronger than steam' and in the next

stanza the extreme irony of their situation, the contrast between the nation's wealth and the poverty of its masses is rendered in topographical terms; the moral point being made by means of the urban landscape.

> Onward, onward, with hasty feet,
> They swarm - and westward still -
> Masses born to drink and eat,
> But starving amidst Whitechapel's meat,
> And famishing down Cornhill!
> Through the Poultry - but still unfed -
> Christian Charity, hang your head!
> Hungry - passing the Street of Bread;
> Thirsty - the street of Milk;
> Ragged - beside the Ludgate Mart,
> So gorgeous through Mechanic-Art,
> With cotton, and wool, and silk!

Pope's Dunciad before and later poems like Davidson's Exodus from Houndsditch gain similar effects from the image of a surging crowd threatening the long established foundations of known buildings. There is a strong element of fantasy; a nightmare quality which comes from the transformation of familiar scenes by a frightening elemental force, usually conveyed in the metaphor of a rising flood. Hood's poem is an allegory in which the workers' lives are entirely determined by the employers' apportioning of time; but in their response to these dictates the workers manifest an alarming force in the movement of history. The poet represents the scene as though in a vision. It is an early example of the transformation of the urban landscape through allegory or dream which was also to be practised by Tennyson, John Davidson and others, but most notably by James Thomson in whose hands the poetry of the city took on a new dimension.

In general, though, Hood was to turn to the actualities of the contemporary city, heightening his material only by the power of his imaginative sympathy with individuals. A poem which became almost as popular as 'The Song of the Shirt' was 'The Bridge of Sighs', published in 1844. It too was probably inspired by journalism, this time by a report in The Times of a woman tried for attempted suicide who had been led to it by the misery of her circumstances. The poem is asking compassion for a young woman who has drowned herself in the river, and its appeal, as in the other poems is for Christian charity from those who might otherwise condemn because they did not understand. Re-creating the scene he gives some details of the city background:

> Where the lamps quiver
> So far in the river,
> With many a light
> From window and casement,
> From garret to basement,
> She stood with amazement,
> Houseless by night.
>
> The bleak wind of March
> Made her tremble and shiver;
> But not the dark arch,
> Or the black flowing river;
> Mad from life's history,
> Glad to death's mystery,
> Swift to be hurl'd -
> Anywhere, anywhere,
> Out of the world![8]

As in 'The Song of the Shirt' the touches of external detail are only part of the total impression we have of the suffering which has been caused by the city and its conditions. He is not writing consciously as a 'city poet' in the same way as the Smith brothers

or Locker-Lampson, nor does his work give the impression of first-hand experience. His task involved presenting situations and lives alien to his own experience. There is a tact and self-effacement which gives his work much of its grace and which would help to account for his popularity with a very wide audience. Robert Buchanan acknowledged Hood as having at times mastered the kind of poetry he himself wished to write:

> Hood alone, once or twice caught the throb of the great heart of modern time; had his sympathies been closelier concentrated, and his necessities been less urgent, I believe this wonderful and totally misunderstood genius might have done much to revolutionize English poetry; for he more than once evinced glimmers of sympathy, sanity, insight and single-hearted beneficence which it is difficult to discover even in Wordsworth.[9]

Hood's humanitarian poems with their city settings did a great deal to alter pre-conceptions about the subject matter of different kinds of poetry. If Lamb and Locker-Lampson were popularising the city in a certain way, Hood demonstrated that it was not necessary to share their restricted outlook. There were long-established connections between the city and social satire, and Hood, while confirming these, added the possibility of seriousness and pathos, the idea that the emotions of 'higher poetry' could be brought to the poetry of the city. At the same time he was helping to establish a strain of poetic realism. When journalism and prose writing in general took progressive steps away from the social preoccupations of 18c Grub Street towards wider themes, Hood made sure that poetry went along with it, by using the material of newspapers and magazines and by writing with the journalists' aims of conversion and reform.

Charles Mackay, like Hood, was connected with the newspaper world. He edited the Illustrated London News for a while and was the Times correspondent during the American Civil War. He was more actively involved in politics and reform movements than was Hood and went further in the use of poetry for specific causes. An introductory essay to a volume published in 1850 argues against 'fiction' and frivolity in poetry, because he thinks it should be utilitarian and truthful. He sees no reason why the poet should not be concerned with science, religion and politics. There are echoes of both Blake and Wordsworth in Mackay's work, with Wordsworth the strongest influence stylistically. He adopts part of the Wordsworthian stylistic creed for his particular social purpose. The preface to an edition of one of his works claims, 'They were written as plainly as possible, that they might express the general sentiment of the toiling classes in phraseology broad, simple and intelligible.'[10]

Thomas Hood, faced with the prospect of the crowd, approached its members with imaginative sympathy; Mackay set out to be its spokesman. The section in his collected poems entitled 'London Lyrics' has a sonnet called 'The Coming Time' in which the poet asks what he should do to be 'for ever known'. He is told in reply that he should proclaim the feeling of the Crowd:

> Listen to the moan
> That sinks and swells in fitful undertone,
> And lend it words, and give the shadow form; -
> And see the Light now pale and dimly shown,
> That yet shall beam resplendent after storm.
> Preach thou their coming, if thy soul aspire
> To be the foremost in the ranks of fame;
> Prepare the way with hands that will not tire,
> And tongue unflattering, and o'er earth proclaim
> The shadow, the ROUSED MULTITUDE; - the Cry,
> 'Justice of ALL' - the Light, TRUE LIBERTY.

This is clearly what Mackay sees himself as doing. A volume written in 1845-6 is called 'Voices from the Crowd', and contains such poems as 'The Cry of the People before the Repeal of the Corn Laws', 'The Watcher on the Tower', 'The Good Time Coming' and 'The Young Man's Petition to their Employers'. In these poems the message takes precedence and the references to urban surroundings are subordinate to it. The first stanza of 'The Cry of the People before the Repeal of the Corn Laws' is an example:

> Our backs are bow'd with the exceeding weight
> Of toil and sorrow; and our pallid faces
> Shrivel before their time. Early and late
> We labour in the old accustomed places,
> Beside our close and melancholy looms,
> Or wither in the coal seams dark and dreary,
> Or breathe sick vapours in o'ercrowded rooms,
> Or in the healthier fields dig till we weary,
> And grow old men ere we have reach'd our prime,
> With scarce a wish, but death, to ask of Time.

The 'London Lyrics' most of which were written at the same period, show a different approach. Not only is the city more prominent, as we would expect, but Mackay tends to concentrate more on individual people and occasionally shows his own experience of the city. A recurring theme is that of the misery on 'the solitary bridges of the midnight city', the young female suicides who inspired 'The Bridge of Sighs'. It comes in the first poem, 'What Big Ben said to London at Midnight' with the first striking of the hour:

> ONE - and the sound rang loud and clear, -
> 'May Heaven her sin forgive her!
> 'She hath gone!' he saith, 'gone to her death
> In the hush of the rolling river.
> She hath fled from hunger, and scorn, and shame,
> And the town's polluting touch;
> And though she hath sinn'd, look kindly on her
> [illegible]uffered much?'

In the poem, 'Above and Below' come the lines:

> City of miseries untold;
> Thy hidest below in thy treacherous waters,
> The death-cold forms of Beauty's daughters.

And in case the similarity to Hood became too obvious, the poem 'Waterloo Bridge, 1841' had bracketed after the title, 'Before the publication of the "Bridge of Sighs" by Thomas Hood.' Mackay does more to evoke the setting and atmosphere than does Hood, selecting those details from the city landscape which create an appropriate mood of desolation. The poem as a whole is marred by the almost comic effect of bathos in the final line:

> Upon the solitary bridge the light
> Shone dim; the wind swept howling on its way,
> And tower and spire stood hidden in the gray
> Half-darkness of the raw and rainy night,
> When one still young and fair, with eyes mad-bright,
> Paced up and down, and with a look of woe,
> Gazed on the waters gliding black below,
> Or the dull houses looming on her sight, -
> And said within herself, - 'Can I endure
> Longer this weight of misery and scorn?
> Ah no! Love-blighted - sick at heart - and poor, -
> Deceived - undone - and utterly forlorn!
> Why should I live? forgive me, Lord!' she cried,
> Sprang sudden to the brink, dash'd headlong down -
> and died!

As a social commentator, one of Mackay's chief themes is the contrast in the Victorian city between evidence of great wealth and material progress on the one hand, and signs of poverty and misery that went with it. In his poetry this usually takes the form of comparative descriptions of rich and poor as in 'Mary and Lady Mary or Next Door Neighbours' or the poem 'False Hair' which reads as though influenced by 'The Song of the Shirt'. The second stanza runs:

Who'll buy hair of a lustrous yellow?
Maids and matrons, 'tis bright as gold,
'Twas shorn from the head of a wretched pauper
Starving with hunger and bitter cold.
It brought her a supper, a bed, and a breakfast;
Buy it fair ladies whose locks are thin,
'Twill help to cheat the silly lovers
Who care not for heads that have brains within.

In 'Above and Below' the contrast is shown in descriptions of the Thames in its two aspects. One stanza draws attention to the wealth that had come through trade, the other to the misery which exists at a lower level. It is interesting that the river as seen 'Above' has marked similarities to the poems in praise of the city at earlier periods when the Thames was more often the subject of panegyric.

Mighty river, oh, mighty river,
Rolling in ebb and flow for ever,
Through the city so vast and old;
Through massive bridges - by domes and spires,
Crown'd with the smoke of a myriad fires; -
City of majesty, power, and gold; -
Thou lovest to float on thy waters dull
The white-winged fleets so beautiful,
And the lordly steamers speeding along,
Wind defying, and swift and strong;
Thou bearest them all on thy motherly breast,
Laden with riches, at Trade's behest ...

The contrast of the second stanza brings us back to a more common view of the nineteenth century city, with the reference to the 'death-cold forms of Beauty's daughters', as quoted above.

If the treatment of the city in this poem seems rather abstract there are a number of others in which the details are concrete and particularised. One entitled 'Street Companions' is of a different kind from most of the others and looks forward to a theme which

became more popular in the eighteen-nineties. This is the presentation of an experience of almost visionary nature in which the poet abstracts himself from the city around him at the time, later examples being Dowson's 'Benedictio Domini' and Lionel Johnson's 'Plato in London'. Mackay, in his poem describes himself communing with the spirits of Verulam and Milton. Despite his proletarian sympathies, Mackay was not exempt from the sense of isolation already observed in Blake, Wordworth and Tennyson. In the verses selected below we find the movement of withdrawal from the Crowd similar to that described by Wordsworth in The Prelude, Book 7. Mackay's imaginary companions are proof against the terrible sense of isolation produced by the city. In these verses the contrast between the poet's abstraction and his city surroundings is made clear by a realistic presentation of those surroundings:

> Whene'er through Gray's Inn porch I stray,
> I meet a spirit by the way,
> He wanders with me all alone,
> And talks with me in undertone.
>
> The crowd is busy seeking gold,
> It cannot see what I behold;
> I and the spirit pass along
> Unknown, unnoticed in the throng. ...
>
> The dull brick houses of the square,
> The bustle of the thoroughfare,
> The sounds, the sights, the crush of men,
> Are present but forgotten then. ...
>
> He goes with me through crowded ways,
> A friend and mentor in the maze,
> Through Chancery Lane to Lincoln's Inn,
> To Fleet Street, through the moil and din.
>
> I meet another spirit there,
> A blind old man with forehead fair,
> Who ever walks the right-hand side,
> Towards the fountain of St Bride.

Amid the peal of jangling bells,
Of people's roar that falls and swells,
The whirl of wheels and tramp of steeds,
He talks to me of noble deeds.

I hear his voice above the crush,
As to and fro the people rush;
Benign and calm upon his face
Sits melancholy, robed in grace.

He hath no need of common eyes,
He sees the fields of Paradise;
He sees and pictures unto mine
A gorgeous vision, most divine.

With such companions at my side
I float on London's human tide;
An atom on its billows thrown,
But lonely never, nor alone.

We have already seen how in 'Waterloo Bridge' Mackay builds up a mood, in his choice of certain features of the urban scene. In other poems we find a similar ability to manipulate this material for dramatic effect, or to create a landscape in keeping with a human situation. In 'The Phantoms of St Sepulchre', a youth condemned to the gallows describes the circumstances under which he saw the ghosts of three women who had been wrongfully hanged. His surroundings undergo changes under the pressure of his emotions:

The houses dull seem'd numb with frost,
The streets seem'd wider than of yore,
And the struggling passengers trod, like ghosts,
Silently in the pathway frore.

Another poem, 'May Mary' tells of an abandoned unmarried mother who has taken to gin and then loses her child, her only comfort. She describes her misery and her surroundings, and just as D. G. Rossetti and Browning have shown how the mind under such stress will dwell irrelevantly on the intricate details of a flower, so in this poem

Mackay shows the woman's attention focussed on the reflection of raindrops in the gaslight:

> Half-past three in the morning!
> And no one in the street
> But me, on the sheltering doorstep
> Resting my weary feet; -
> Watching the rain-drops patter
> And dance where the puddles run,
> As bright in the flaring gas-light
> As dewdrops in the sun.

Mackay's most prolonged description of the physical appearance of a city comes in a piece which is not grouped as one of the 'London Lyrics'. It is called 'The Two Nightingales: An Apologue for Poets' and may be a reflection of how Mackay himself was beginning to feel about writing for, as well as about, the town. In the poem, two nightingales are singing in the woods and one, finding it too quiet and desiring an audience flies to the town. But no-one takes any notice of his singing. The other, who stays in the woods is heard by only a few, but these few are appreciative. The lines describing the city are clearly realised both visually and aurally:

> A vast, smoke-mantled, dim metropolis,
> With domes and columns, spires and monuments,
> And multitudinous chimneys tall as these,
> Towering towards the ever -hazy sky;
> And here alighting on a house-top, sat,
> And look'd about him. Far on every side
> Stretch'd the long line of streets and throughfares,
> Trod by a busy and impatient mass.
> Church-bells rang heavily on the morning air,
> And chariots rattled o'er the dusty stones,
> Loud was the roaring of the multitude,
> Loud was the clink of hammers on the ear,
> And loud the whirling of incessant wheels,
> And ever-hissing steam in factories vast.

It is appropriate that the main impression here is of discordant noise. In complete contrast, one of two sonnets with the title 'Unknown Romances' reflects on what might go on behind the walls of the houses the poet sees as he gazes at the city. The language has echoes of both Keats and Wordsworth, and we see here that Mackay, like Wordsworth, can present the city as a setting for meditation and reflection. But as in 'Upon Westminster Bridge' it is only when the streets are empty that the poet can confront them directly:

> Oft have I wandered when the first faint light
> Of morning shone upon the steeple-vanes
> Of sleeping London, through the silent night,
> Musing on memories of joys and pains; -
> And looking down long vistas of dim lanes
> And shadowy streets, one after other spread
> In endless coil, have thought what hopes now dead
> Once bloomed in every house, what tearful rains
> Women have wept, for husband, sire or son;
> What love and sorrow ran their course in each,
> And what great silent tragedies were done; -
> And wish'd the dumb and secret walls had speech,
> That they might whisper to me, one by one,
> The sad true lessons that their walls might teach.[11]

I have not dealt with all the 'London Lyrics', but the ones chosen should give some idea of Mackay's range and limitations. He approaches the subject of the city with the straightforward confidence of one who believes in the importance of facts and concrete detail, and shows himself able to connect it to some purpose with the feelings of humanity, his chief concern. In this sense he was a Wordsworthian as in the desire to render experience directly, and he uses recognisably Wordsworthian rhythms and vocabulary. But the earlier poet's ability to 'give the charm of novelty to things of everyday' is completely lacking. Mackay's vocabulary tends to be

flat and his diction predictable. This of course dulls the way in which visual images are presented. Not only does he lack the effects of startling clarity which Wordsworth's use of language sometimes produced, but he has little sensitivity to his material. The urban subject-matter has in no way modified his style. As a poet of the city Mackay has failed to take up the challenge except in the broadest sense - by writing about it.

Mackay does, however, contribute to urban poetry as a genre in another way. In 1841 he edited for the Percy Society A Collection of Songs and Ballads 'Relative to the London Prentices and Trades; and to the affairs of London generally'. These are street songs and ballads of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries telling of the working life of London, and of its taverns, entertainment and political events. In this project he was consciously appealing to general interest in the changing face of London. In the advertisement he explains that he has 'added a few that are interesting at the present time from their mention of the ancient topography of this daily increasing city.'

Although such collections as Roxburghe Ballads and Pills to Purge Melancholy contained much of the same material, the importance of this collection is that London is the unifying theme. An interest in London is considered enough to justify the volume while a mention of any London street name seems to have qualified a poem for inclusion. A taste for poetry about 'the ancient topography of this daily increasing city' may have been that of the antiquarian or seeker after nostalgia, as catered for by the writers in the last chapter. But anyone who came across Mackay's collection would have been introduced to a different world - that of trades and taverns and the wages of different occupations. This, for example, is

'Freeman's Song of Four Voices':

> The servingman waiteth fro' street to street,
> With blowing his nails and beating his feet:
> And serveth for forty shillings a yeare,
> That 'tis impossible to make good cheare.

A characteristic which distinguishes urban and industrial folk song from that of rural areas is a tendency to speak plainly about material conditions. Compared with songs about love and oak trees, it is utilitarian. In industrial areas where the class-struggle was most sharp, such as in the mining towns of north-east England the songs often had several purposes - to encourage the workers, to make the masters tremble, to arouse sympathy and solidarity from workers in other areas.[12] For such purposes the wages and hours or the specific causes of a dispute needed to be spelt out. We find this tradition surviving in less intense form in the music-hall culture of the fin de siècle and emerging in a literary context in John Davidson's 'Thirty Bob a Week'.

During the period of Hood and Mackay there were fruitful relationships between proletarian and literary culture. Hood, as we have seen, produced a street ballad in 'The Song of the Shirt'. The Chartist movement also established such communications. William Roberts the Chartist lawyer who defended the miners' union became a hero of several industrial folk songs. Mackay in his songs against the Corn Law was attempting to draw on this culture, while Hood was asked by the Anti-Corn Law League to be its poet-laureate.

Chartist poetry can seem a little disappointing if considered only in the context of urban poetry. The reasons are understandable enough. Mackay, who was not himself a Chartist (in fact he considered them extremists whose activities would alienate public sympathy) had enough of Wordsworth in him to know he must attempt

to present the concrete world. For the Chartists, the struggle was more consuming, and as a result their work tends not to dwell on the world about them, and often abounds in great rousing abstractions, Life, Liberty, Humanity. They were more heavily oppressed by the conditions of urban life and so very naturally, when they do evoke place it is the country to which they long to escape. Occasionally, however they have given a vivid glimpse of the town, and then there is an energy fusing and vitalising the material, in comparison with which Mackay's work seems flat and heavy. Thomas Cooper was imprisoned for his activities, and while there in 1843 wrote a long poem, The Purgatory of Suicides, telling of suicides through the ages. Part of it is set in the contemporary city. Here he describes those isolated figures estranged from their fellow men in the midst of crowds, who become increasingly familiar in urban poetry:

> London! how imageable seems the strife
> Of thy huge crowds amid this solitude!
> Instinct with hot, heart-feverous, throbbing life -
> Racers for Mammon - day by day renewed -
> Quick motley actors in Mind's interlude -
> They flit before me; or again I walk
> Wonder-lost less with splendour unembued
> With power of thought than human shapes that stalk
> Through thy vast wilderness of ways, and, smiling talk
>
> With their own wretchedness which hath estranged
> Them from their kind, but cannot stifle dreams
> That Beggary's rags shall, one day, be exchanged
> For Grandeur's robes, and Fortune's favoring beams
> Gild their last hours. These, these amid thy streams
> Of populousness, thy lavish shows of pride,
> And pomp, and equipage, were living themes
> For healthiest thought that did my folly chide
> When I, along thy streets, a gazing 'venturer hied[13]

Cooper writes of the disordered consciousness whose misery and estrangement is aggravated by the city, and whose delusions include the dream that some magic change in circumstances will bring great wealth. But such a fantasy was not confined to the deranged: it formed the basis of urban folk myths, popular novels (receiving ironic treatment in Dickens's Great Expectations) and later appeared frequently in music-hall songs.

Another form of escape was to the country, although the possibility of ever living there again was so remote that this too tended to become a dream. A poem by Gerald Massey, another Chartist, called 'A Song in the City' dwells less on the misery of his life in the city and more on the country for which the singer yearns. Similarly Ebenezer Elliott, a Chartist for a short time, considered himself a Nature poet whose professed aim was to create a longing for the country. (This would have been more accessible to workers in his native Sheffield than to many in London.) He wrote, 'I am sufficiently rewarded if my poetry has led one poor despairing victim of misrule from the alehouse to the fields'.[14]

'The Factory Town' by Ernest Jones, first appeared in 1847 in The Labourer, a Chartist journal edited by Jones with Feargus O'Connor. In this poem the image of the country comes in the desire for the complete destruction of the town and its factories. The city is evoked with intensity and suggests those illustrations for Paradise Lost made by John Martin. Even if Jones had not read Dante, the similarity to his evocation of Hell is extraordinary:

> The night had sunk along the city,
> It was a bleak and cheerless hour;
> The wild-winds sung their solemn ditty
> To cold, grey wall and blackened tower.

The factories gave forth lurid fires
From pent-up hells within their breast;
E'en Aetna's burning wrath expires,
But man's volcanoes never rest.

Women, children, men were toiling,
Locked in dungeons close and black,
Life's fast-fading thread uncoiling
Round the wheel, the modern rack!

E'en the very stars seem troubled
With the mingled fume and roar;
The city like a cauldron bubbled,
With its poison boiling o'er

For the reeking walls environ
Mingled groups of death and life:
Fellow workmen, flesh and iron,
Side by side in deadly strife.

In contrast with these lines the evocation of the country seems trite; it is as if the search for images to describe the city had stretched the poet's imagination, while the country allows him to fall back on clichés. Then the idea of the deserted factory restores the poem's vitality.

Then, how many a happy village
Shall be smiling o'er the plain,
Amid the corn-field's pleasant tillage,
And the orchard's rich domain!

While with rotting roof and rafter,
Drops the factory stone by stone,
Echoing loud with childhood's laughter,
Where it hung with manhood's groan![15]

The poetry of Hood, Mackay and the Chartists is realistic in more senses than one. Not only does it give a strong impression of the physical presence of the city it also shows insight into the nature of the social relations which exist there. The ability of

these poets to attempt such material stems largely, I think from their refusal to shy away from some of the more disconcerting aspects of urban life, particularly the threatening presence of the crowd or 'mass' as it was now becoming. They identified with its plight both collective and individual, and although this provided them with difficult material for which they were not always able to find a language, it did to some extent liberate them to attempt expression of what for many poets was an impossible subject. Many of their poems were included in an anthology edited in 1893 by H. S. Salt, the Humanitarian who continued the traditions being established at this time. He paid tribute to those 'minor' writers who while never achieving the fame of the great literary figures of the century, seemed to him to have more sensitivity to the important developments of the age:

> It is a remarkable fact, and worth a trifle more consideration than critics are disposed to afford it, that neither Tennyson nor Browning, neither our great 'representative' poet, nor our great 'intellectual' poet, was cognisant of the real drift of the social movement that dates from the stormy years of the 'Forties. Judged from the democratic standpoint (which of course is only one standpoint out of several, but on that account not to be neglected), these great poets must be admitted to have left the work to men of less genius, but truer social instincts than themselves; and to these lesser men will be the greater honour.[16]

The ability to take up urban themes was one aspect of this achievement.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. Thomas Hood, Thomas Hood and Charles Lamb, The Literary Reminiscences of Thomas Hood, ed. Walter Jerrold, (London, 1930), p. 113.

2. Hood to Dickens in Dickens - The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971).

3. Hood, review of Master Humphrey's Clock by Charles Dickens in The Athenaeum, 7 November, 1840, Works, ed. his son, (London, 1862), Vol. V, p. 357.

4. Dickens to Douglas Jerrold, quoted in Alexander Welsh, The City of Dickens, (Oxford, 1971), p. 50.

5. J. L. and B. Hammond, The Age of the Chartists, (London, 1930), p. 79.

6. Hood, quoted in J. C. Reid, Thomas Hood, (London, 1963), p. 13.

7. Quoted in Asa Briggs, Victorian Cities (London, 1963), p. 61.

8. Hood's poems are in Works, ed. his son, (London, 1862).

9. Robert Buchanan, 'On my Own Tentatives', David Gray and Other Essays, (London, 1868), p. 295.

10. Charles Mackay, Preface to Fifth Edition of Poetical Works, (London, 1857).

11. Charles Mackay's poems are quoted from his Poetical Works, (London, 1876).

12. See A. L. Lloyd, Folk Song in England, (London, 1967).

13. Thomas Cooper, The Purgatory of Suicides, Poetical Works, 1877.

14. Ebenezer Elliott, in William Odom, Two Sheffield Poets, (London, 1929), p. 101.

15. Ernest Jones, 'The Factory Town', The Battle-day and other poems, (London, 1855).

16. H. S. Salt, Preface to Songs of Freedom, 1893.

CHAPTER FOUR

'APOLLO DISCROWNED'

> There are moods when one is prone to believe that, in these last days, no longer by 'clear spring or shady grove', no more upon any Pindus or Parnassus, or by the sides of any Castaly, are the true and lawful haunts of the poetic powers; but, we could believe it, if anywhere, in the blank and desolate streets, and upon the solitary bridges of the midnight city, where Guilt is, and wild Temptation, and the dire compulsion of what has been done - ... there walks the discrowned Apollo with unstrung lyre ...[1]

Clough wrote these words in 1853 in a review of some poems by Matthew Arnold and Alexander Smith. He had clearly become aware of the new developments affecting poetry as well as prose, and the extract suggests that he was thinking in particular of the subject-matter of Hood. In the same review he condemns poets who confine themselves to pastoral or classical and oriental sources, claiming that it is time poets did what novelists were doing, deal with the ordinary, rather than the rare facts of human life:

> The modern novel is preferred to the modern poem because we do feel here an attempt to include those indispensable latest addenda - these phenomena which, if we forget on Sunday, we must remember on Monday - these positive matters of fact, which people, who are not verse-writers are obliged to have to do with.

He praises Alexander Smith for avoiding the pastoral and satisfying a need prompted by the new urban material. But Clough, though advocating realism is also thinking of something more:

> There is a charm, for example, in finding as we do, continual images drawn from the busy seats of industry;

> it seems to satisfy a want that we have long been
> conscious of, when we see the black streams that
> welter out of factories, the dreary lengths of urban
> and suburban dustiness,
>
> The squares and streets,
> And the faces that one meets,
>
> irradiated with a gleam of divine purity.

If Apollo is discrowned and his lyre unstrung, this 'gleam of divine purity' is some quality whereby the poet elevates this material, making it worthy subject matter for poetry. Clough was only one of the writers concerned at this time to recognise the fitness of the city and its life as matter for poetry and also to see the problem of presenting it in heightened form. The romantic conception of poetry was struggling to come to terms with material which, if presented directly and truthfully, seemed in every way inimical to the romantic spirit.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes the new conception of the poet in Aurora Leigh. The poet must express the true character of contemporary life and recognise as he does that it may be the vehicle of a higher Truth. She has no time for those who escape into the past:

> I do distrust the poet who discerns
> No character or glory in his times,
> And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
> Past moat and drawbridge into a castle-court.

The poet must represent 'this live, throbbing age' and avoid the temptation to flinch from 'unpoetic' material:

> These crowds are very good
> For meditation (when we are very strong)
> Though love of beauty make us timorous,
> And draws us backward from the coarse town-sights
> To count the daisies upon dappled fields

And hear the streams bleat on among the hills
In innocent and indolent repose,
While still with silken elegaic thoughts
We wind out from us the distracting world
And die into the chrysalis of a man,
And leave the best that may, to come of us,
In some brown moth. I would be bold and bear
To look into the swarthiest face of things,
For God's sake who has made them.

The 'swarthiest face of things' would include the figure of a beggar boy mentioned a little later, when she explains that Nature does not trust us with 'Her larger sense of beauty and desire':

But tethers us to a lily or a rose
And bids us diet on the dew inside,
Left ignorant that the hungry beggar-boy
...
Bears yet a breastful of a fellow-world
To this world, undisparaged, undespoiled.[2]

The plea is for realism not for the sake of realism, but because only by seeing the world clearly as it is can we see its true significance as revealed in the 'world beyond'. This is of course the idea common to Romanticism and Symbolism. In their presentation of the city, some sense of it is to be found in Wordsworth, Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot but very rarely in other poets. The problem of seeing the subject clearly and relating it at the same time to some sense of a wider significance was almost insurmountable.

A writer who occupied himself with this problem both in his prose and in his practice as a poet was Robert Buchanan. We see him formulating his views on it in an attack on Crabbe. Crabbe was a predecessor of the urban realists. His poem 'The Village' had attempted to counteract the aura of sentimentality thrown over country life by Goldsmith in 'The Deserted Village', in order to

give instead a realistic picture. 'The Borough' (1810) was intended as a faithful representation of a town and its life. Although its preface shows a great respect for the principles of mimesis the opening lines acknowledge how alien the material is to poetry:

> Cities and towns, the various haunts of men,
> Require the pencil; they defy the pen:
> Could he, who sang so well the Grecian fleet,
> So well have sung of alley, lane, or street?

Nevertheless, he proceeds to describe in some detail the physical appearance of streets and buildings, particularly in the passage 'The poor and their dwellings' where 'sloping tenements on props', building yards, low porches and lack of pavements are all faithfully delineated.

Buchanan was totally unsympathetic to this kind of naturalism as he explains in an essay on Crabbe:

> A careful study of his work has revealed to me abundant knowledge of life, considerable sympathy, little or no insight and no emotion. The poems are photographs, not pictures. There is no spiritualization, none of that fine selective instinct which invariably accompanies deep artistic feeling. ...
>
> He describes every cranny of a cottage, every gable, every crack in the wall, every kitchen utensil, - when his story concerns the soul of the inmate. He pieces out a churchyard like so much grocery, into so many lives and graves. There is no glamour in his eyes when he looks on death; he is noting the bedroom furniture and the dirty sheets.[3]

The mere enumeration of detail is not what Buchanan understands by realism; it is only part of what is required. For him the poet must concentrate the full force of his imagination on the concrete world. He uses the term 'mystic realism' and in an essay on that subject defines the work of the poet:

> Imagination is not, as some seem to imply, the power of conjuring up the remote and unknowable, but the gift of realising correctly in correct images the truths of things as they are and ever have been. He who can see no poetry in his own time is a very unimaginative person.[4]

Buchanan's dissatisfaction with Crabbe's work was not in the material he had chosen, but in his inability to see the poetry in it. His own subject matter seemed even more unpromising than Crabbe's as modern life had increased in ugliness. But he would extract beauty from it.

> Let it be at once conceded that our modern life is complex and irritating, and at a superficial glance, sadly deficient in the picturesque. Streets are not beautiful, and this is the age of streets; trade seems selfish and common, and this is the age of trade; railways, educational establishments, poor houses, debating societies, are not romantic and this is the age of all these. But if we strip off the hard outer crust of these things, if we pass from the unpicturesqueness of externals to the currents which flow beneath, who then shall say that this life is barren of poetry?[5]

How was Buchanan to 'strip off the hard outer crust of things' and find the poetry? In what did the 'currents which flow beneath' consist? Like Clough's 'gleam of divine purity' which, he claimed, irradiated the urban dreariness, this mystic vision might be hard to see and even harder to communicate. For Buchanan the answer lay in human feeling, consisting not so much of his own responses to the material, but of the emotions of those who lived in the city. He would attempt to do for the inhabitants of the city what Wordsworth had done for the Leech Gatherer and the Old Cumberland Beggar. But his task was more difficult, because in his work the human emotions

had to carry more weight, for he intended them to replace the beauty of pastoral images in creating the poem's heightened effect. Buchanan describes these aims in relation to a poem 'The Little Milliner':

> It was clearly my endeavour in this poem, to evolve the fine Arcadian feeling out of the dullest obscurity, to show how even brick walls and stone houses may be made to blossom as it were, into blooms and flowers; to produce by delicate passion and sweet emotion an effect similar to that which pastoral poets have produced by means of greenery and bright sunshine. In close connection with all that is dark and solitary in London life, the little milliner was to walk in a light such as lies on country fields, exhibiting, as a critic happily phrases it, 'all the passion of youth, modulated by all the innocence of a naked baby'.[6]

It is scarcely surprising that, as well as admiring Wordsworth (he describes him 'dissecting silent endurance with iron pathos') Buchanan should have had the strong appreciation for Hood, remarked in the previous chapter. Buchanan shared with Hood and Mackay the belief that the poetry of the modern city was, in his own phrase, the 'poetry of humanity'. But Buchanan's emphasis was different. In his case the interests served were aesthetic as much as social; he wrote about the lives of city-dwellers because it was in these lives that he found the qualities which could animate the material he felt bound to present. In the Wordsworthian triangle of the poet, the physical external world, and humanity, he began by assuming the link between the first two and coming through that to embrace the third. He is a true disciple of Wordsworth, not an imitator.

When Buchanan first left Scotland for London to be a poet he rented a garret which he shared for a while with his great friend, another Scots poet, David Gray. While Gray was lying sick in London, tended by Buchanan, he was visited on one occasion by Charles Mackay, then a successful journalist. It would be tempting to imagine conversations between Mackay and Buchanan, held appropriately in a London garret where their friend lay a victim of the 'town's polluting touch', in which they discussed the kind of poetry both were writing. Unfortunately Mackay's only reference to Buchanan in his recollections is a passing mention of another young man who shared Gray's room and who was smoking far too much![7]

If Buchanan read Mackay's poetry, I think he would have found it lacking in the kind of feeling he required in poetry. Although Mackay was writing 'the poetry of humanity', Buchanan himself preferred to celebrate the more personal and individual emotions and situations. This presented the difficulties we would expect. Like Wordsworth in the city, Buchanan suffered a feeling of estrangement from his surroundings and from his fellow men, but in addition he recognised the way in which alienation seemed to afflict all people caught up in the business of living in the city. If he was 'to produce by delicate passion and sweet emotion an effect similar to that which pastoral poets have produced by means of greenery and bright sunshine' he recognised that this search would come up against the essential difficulty of finding any beauty in bricks and paving stones. The deadening of many normal human feelings had an analogy in the ugliness and monotony of streets. 'Bexhill 1866' the introductory piece to London Poems (1866) describes the problem for him of transforming this subject matter. While he is in the city itself his perceptions are clouded; he has a sense of

underlying spiritual truths to be extracted from the city, but he is unable to reach them. By contrast, the sound of the sea, from which he is now absent, constantly haunts him:

> Thereto not seldom did I seek to make
> The busy life of London musical,
> And phrase in modern song the troubled lives
> Of dwellers in the sunless lanes and streets,
> Yet ever was I haunted from afar,
> While singing; and the murmur of the sea
> Deepen'd my mood; while everywhere I saw,
> Flowing beneath the blackness of the streets,
> The current of sublimer, sweeter life,
> Which is the source of human smiles and tears,
> And melodised becomes the strength of song.

He is faced with the problem not only of his own uneasiness with his surroundings, but also with the apparent intransigence of his human material:

> But easier far the task to sing of kings,
> Or weave weird ballads where the moon-dew glistens,
> Than body forth this life in beauteous sound;
> The crowd had voices, but each living man
> Within the crowd seem'd silence-smit and hard;
> They only heard the murmur of the town,
> They only felt the dimness in their eyes,
> And now and then turn'd startled, when they saw
> Some weary one fling up his arms and drop,
> Clay-cold among them, - and they scarcely grieved,
> But hush'd their hearts a time and hurried on.

It is only when he gives up and retreats to 'pastoral solitude' that he can handle his subject effectively. Just as the sea had haunted him in London, now the roar of the city comes to him in the country, and this, combined with the serener state of mind afforded by his country surroundings, enables him to write of London as he intends. When the material no longer oppresses him directly he is able to re-create it in his imagination:

> The terrible city loom'd from far away
> And gather'd on me cloudily, dropping dews,
> Even as those phantoms of departed days
> Had haunted me in London streets and lanes.
> Wherefore in brighter mood I sought again
> To make the life of London musical
> And sought the mirror of my soul for shapes
> That linger'd, faces bright or agonised,
> Yet ever taking something beautiful
> From glamour of green branches, and of clouds
> That glided piloted by golden airs.

Recollection in tranquillity was no more an evasion of the task of realism for Buchanan than it had been for Wordsworth. He does not pretend that the emotional life of the city is richer or more satisfying than it is, but he does show some of its true nature and complexity. His dramas of simple people illustrate the same kind of enduring human qualities we find in Wordsworth's figures, but the differences in situation and response are honestly conveyed. 'Liz', for example, tells of a girl's visit to the country. It is described as light and clear and sweet, but it overpowers her and at nightfall she feels afraid. She expresses her relief at returning to the city:

> So back to London town I turn'd my face,
> And crept into the great black streets again;
> And when I breathed the smoke and heard the roar,
> Why, I was better, for in London here
> My heart was busy and I felt no fear.

A critic complained in Buchanan of his characters' 'querulous longing for the country', presumably hastening to the superficial conclusion which the pastoral/city conflict would most commonly lead to. But Buchanan was too much of a realist in his observation of human responses, and he defends himself as follows:

> But where is the querulous, where the childish longing for the country in Liz? Liz breathes happily only in the deep miasma of the city: a being possible only there; knowing nothing of light or sunshine, and caring to know nothing of these. She tries the country once, because she thinks that life is easier there; but far from moving her to joy, the light and colour trouble her to intensest pain.

The threat to individual feeling and normal human relations in the city's anonymous crowd had already been observed by Wordsworth in The Prelude and is to be found in Buchanan's lines from 'Bexhill 1866' quoted above. Again in 'Liz' he shows how the physical surroundings and economic circumstances combine to produce a deadening of feeling:

> And when old mother laid her down to die,
> And parish buried her, I did not cry,
> And hardly seem'd to care;
> I was too hungry and too dull; beside,
> The roar of streets had made me dry as dust -
> It took me all my time, howe'er I tried,
> To keep my limbs alive and earn a crust;
> I had no time for weeping.

In happy circumstances the anonymity of the city is welcomed, as in 'Artist and Model'. Here Buchanan celebrates the piquancy of the kind of instant isolation this can afford. (Baudelaire later explored the possibilities of this state with more depth in his prose poems.) In this case physical features of the city help to create a lighter mood:

> Nobody knows us, heeds us,
> Nobody hears or sees,
> And the shop-lights gleam more gladly
> Than the moon on hedges and trees;
> And people coming and going,

All upon ends of their own,
Though they work a spell on the spirit,
Make it more finely alone.

Light pieces like this, interspersed with the more serious poems, show Buchanan well able to produce the town idylls of Locker-Lampson and his like. But at their most characteristic, Buchanan's London poems tend to combine a strong sense of place with some extreme emotional situation. Here Liz is remembering her first moments of awareness:

I woke
One day, long, long ago, in a dark room,
And saw the housetops round me in the smoke,
And leaning out, look'd down into the gloom,
Saw deep, black pits, blank walls, and broken panes,
And eyes behind the panes, that flash'd at me,
And heard an awful roaring, from the lanes
Of folk I could not see;

In another poem, 'Jane Lewson', the heroine's lonely existence working as a servant for her two sisters is set forth in similar terms. Here Buchanan while not venturing as far as symbolism has made the urban scene in a sense representative of the girl and her position:

and oft
Pausing amid her work, gazed sadly forth
Upon the dismal square of wither'd trees,
The dusty grass that grew within the rails,
The garden-plots where here and there a flower
Grew up and sickened in the smoke, and died;

In 'Nell', a young woman tells of the execution of her lover, a man ignorant rather than evil. Here she wanders the streets at dawn on the day he is to die:

That night, before he died,
I didn't cry - my heart was hard and dried;

But when the clocks went 'one', I took my shawl
To cover up my face, and stole away,
And walk'd along the moonlight streets, where all
Look'd cold and still and gray -
Only the lamps o' London here and there
Scattered a dismal gleaming;
And on I went, and stood in Leicester Square,
Just like a woman dreaming:
And just as 'three' was sounded close at hand,
I started and turn'd east, before I knew, -
Then down Saint Martin's Lane, along the Strand,
And through the toll-gate, on to Waterloo.
How I remember all I saw, although
'Twas only like a dream! -
The long still line of lights, the chilly gleam
Of sunshine on the deep black stream below;
While far, far, far away, along the sky
Streaks soft as silver ran,
And the pale moon look'd paler up on high,
And little sounds in far-off streets began![9]

This extract has obvious resemblances to the grief at dawn theme also found in Tennyson and in another of Buchanan's contemporaries, Alexander Smith. Empty streets, rows of lights, and finally the sounds of morning all help to re-inforce our picture of the woman's desolation. But Buchanan's verse is less tightly constructed or highly charged than either Tennyson's or Smith's. His technique seems far closer to that of a novelist; he has his figure placed in a dramatic situation to which the carefully chosen urban details form a backcloth or scenery. In fact he is at his best when closest to the dramatic or novelistic mode, when he creates characters and situations through which to present the city. Like Hood he takes up a form close to the dramatic monologue with some success. If his poetry seems a little too 'descriptive' or

reflective for post-modernist tastes, his ability to present urban material at all with such lucidity was a considerable achievement. He worked hard at finding the right language. Having broken through one barrier to write about members of the urban masses he was faced with the difficulty of finding a language which was both aesthetically pleasing and, at the same time, authentic. He gives his own account of this:

> As common life was approached more closely, as the danger of vulgarity threatened more and more to interfere with the readers' sense of beauty, the stronger and tenderer was the lyrical note needed. In writing such poems as 'Liz' and 'Nell' the intensest dramatic care was necessary to escape vulgarity on the one hand and false refinement on the other.[10]

He goes on to explain that he decided to choose simple everyday speech, in the belief that to have used slips of grammar would have been an offence against verisimilitude since it would have drawn an inordinate amount of attention to the language. It was not until later in the century that John Davidson and Henley were to take up the challenge of demotic speech.

In many ways what Buchanan offered was Dickens in verse - a certain kind of emotional situation in an urban setting, already popularised by the novelist, now given the 'elevated' status of poetry. Like Dickens he combines accounts of suffering amidst ugly surroundings, often scenes of great pathos, with moments of light-hearted cheerfulness. It is significant that in both writers there is a strong element of the grotesque in those personal relationships most thoroughly embedded in the city. In Buchanan the happier lyrics which show the triumph of human feeling are often about relationships which seem unwittingly to symbolise the very paucity

of human existence in the city. A blind boy can relate happily to his deaf and dumb sweetheart, a woman mourns her dead lover who was a dwarf, a poor tailor has a pet starling for his greatest friend, while a sempstress delights in the company of a blind linnet who is of course, oblivious of their surroundings. To celebrate such triumphs of the human heart presupposes a very low level of expectation. Buchanan is reflecting urban alienation, not in the texture of his verse or even in his own response to the city but in material such as this.

In the 1874 Poetical Works is a group called 'London Lyrics' which was written at the same time as London Poems. These are not objectified in any way, in fact they tend towards abstraction and effusiveness. A number of them are elegiac pieces for David Gray, but although Buchanan recalls their life in London together it is with little in the way of concrete detail. The roar of the city is equated with the noise of the ocean as in 'Bexhill 1866', but apart from occasional references of this kind there is little to explain why these poems should be called 'London Lyrics'. It may simply have been a way of popularising the volume, a fact which would in itself testify to the ever-increasing appeal of London as a subject.

Buchanan continued to have faith in London to provide him with poetic success. In 1888 he published The City of Dream, which may have been intended as a reply to Thomson's City of Dreadful Night, and in 1899, The New Rome presents London as the decadent city of the empire, using themes which had by then been made popular by Symons, Wilde and their contemporaries, prostitutes, the embankment, streetlights, the theatre.

The most compelling of Buchanan's poetry remains the narrative accounts of city life in London Poems. The situations are usually extreme and the city landscape most frequently used as a background for misery and deprivation, both material and emotional. The association of the city with darker states of mind - grief, melancholy, philosophic pessimism - is also established at this period in the work of Alexander Smith. His Life Drama (1852) prompted the remarks by Clough with which this chapter opens; City Poems (1857) confirmed his mastery of the subject. Smith was a Scot whose urban experience was based mainly on Glasgow. He was one of the first to show a markedly aesthetic approach to the subject. Among the factors accounting for this would be the physical situation of Glasgow. Set among mountains it can be viewed from Olympian heights. Smith's social perspective also, was different from that of his London contemporaries; alone, or with one chosen companion, he isolates himself rather than identifying in any way with the urban masses. This does not, however preclude the presence of a certain amount of social observation or the inclusion of the features of the commerce and industry on which the city was based. We notice in his earlier work a tendency to metamorphosise the city at every turn; the need to transform material which might otherwise be unacceptable becomes an aesthetic activity. Reading Shakespeare and Keats will have helped him to form a style in which he creates a poetic language for the city, one which is highly metaphorical, built up as he explains of images:

> Oft with our souls in our eyes all day we fed
> On summer landscapes silver-veined with streams,
> O'er which the air hung silent in its joy -
> With a great city lying in its smoke,
> A monster sleeping in its own thick breath.

There is a sense of delight in the artistic feats which can recreate the scene in metaphor and simile:

> We read and wrote together, slept together;
> We dwelt on slopes against the morning sun,
> We dwelt in crowded streets, and loved to walk
> While Labour slept; for in the ghastly dawn,
> The wildered city seemed a demon's brain,
> The children of the night its evil thoughts.
> Sometimes we sat whole afternoons and watched
> The sunset build a city frail as dream,
> With bridges, streets of splendour, towers; and saw
> The fabrics crumble into rosy ruins,
> And then grow grey as heath. But our chief joy
> Was to draw images from every thing
> And images lay thick upon our talk,
> As shells on ocean sands.[11]

J. H. Buckley has aligned Smith with the 'Spasmodic School',[12] a group which developed that strain in Romanticism most commonly associated with extreme, febrile states of mind. Their language tended to be flamboyantly metaphorical and their heroes isolated figures in extreme situations. They despised formal structures and their work moved from climax to climax, hence the label 'spasmodic' bestowed by a satirical contributor to Blackwoods in 1854. Smith's Life Drama was certainly encouraged by George Gilfillan one of the leading Spasmodics, who considered he had discovered another Keats. But his work seems free of the more abstract excesses of this group. Although some of his dramatic situations are extreme they are conveyed in terms of the surrounding landscape - whether urban or rural - with the result that there is a solid impression of realism. In fact his work would probably have developed along much the same lines on the basis of reading Keats and the Elizabethan dramatists even if he had never come into contact with the Spasmodics. What he

does noticeably share with them, however, is a daring, radical approach to language and this, brought to bear on the city, produces some exciting effects.

His technical confidence is fully developed in 'Glasgow', a piece from City Poems (1857) where passages of direct presentation combine with the figurative language of A Life Drama. The poet tells how the city means to him what Nature seems to mean to others; he was brought up in it and it has been the scene of his deepest feelings. Dismissing the poetic cliches of country and springtime, he says,

> In thee, O City, I discern
> Another beauty, sad and stern.

In describing this 'other beauty' its impact on his senses is conveyed in rich, imaginative language which makes full use of the exciting potential of the city's industrial life. A high proportion of verbs helps to create a sense of energy and vigour:

> Draw thy fierce streams of blinding ore,
> Smite on a thousand anvils, roar
> Down to the harbour bars;
> Smoulder in smoky sunsets, flare
> On rainy nights, with streets and square
> Lie empty to the stars.
> From terrace proud to alley base
> I know thee as my mother's face.
>
> When sunset bathes thee in his gold,
> In wreaths of bronze thy sides are rolled,
> Thy smoke is dusty fire;
> And, from the glory round thee poured,
> A sunbeam like an angel's sword
> Shivers upon a spire.
> Thus have I watched thee, Terror! Dream!
> While the blue night crept up the stream.

Just as for Wordsworth, the emotions which 'humanised his soul' increase his attachment to Nature so that 'the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears', so Smith, having undergone his deepest emotional experiences in the city can say,

> All raptures of this mortal breath,
> Solemnities of life and death,
> Dwell in thy noise alone;
> Of me thou hast become a part -
> Some kindred with my human heart
> Lives in thy streets of stone.

In his concluding lines he reinforces the attachment:

> Thou hast my kith and kin:
> Thou hast that unforgotten grave
> Within thy central din.
> A sacredness of love and death
> Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath.

Smith never describes the city in images of debased pastoral. He either draws his metaphors from myth - monsters, demons, angels - or uses the artificial 'man-made' world of the city itself with which to give an impression of it. The result is that we feel we are being given a concentrated, direct confrontation with urban experience, not one which is diluted by reference to other experience. The use of mythological terminology in conjunction with 'pure' urban imagery adds the subjective, imaginative dimension. We have a very strong sense of a relationship between the material and the state of mind of an individual.

A fuller understanding of how the city has become fused with the most important emotional states is provided by 'A Boy's Poem' in the same volume. Here the city as landscape for grief or despair is further developed. Although personal experience has been

dramatised, it seems certain that some of the important events in the life of the poem's sensitive young hero are drawn from Smith's own store of memories. It is written in the first person and recounts the death of the father, an unhappy school life, illness and visions of death, a disappointed love affair and finally a lonely existence in drab surroundings with a widowed mother until she dies. The setting is an industrial city in mountainous country - it is presumably Glasgow - and we are aware of this environment throughout the poem. Occasionally, some lines describing the city seem like a set piece, some other poem, perhaps which has been worked into this one at a later date. But in most parts there is a powerfully conceived relationship between the youth's emotional state and the urban scene in which it is reflected. Smith somehow shows his personal feeling for the city while demonstrating an ability to re-create it for dramatic purposes.

The very existence of the 'set-piece' passages suggests how much the town has been a preoccupation of Smith's. In this example, the boy is leaving in a steamer to go on a trip into the mountains. The boat passes from the heart of the city's industry to a point where all its power seems reduced to smoke. It could be a short poem in itself:

> The morn rose blue and glorious o'er the world;
> The steamer left the black and oozy wharves,
> And floated down between dark ranks of masts.
> We heard the swarming streets, the noisy mills;
> Saw sooty foundries full of glare and gloom,
> Great bellied chimneys tipped by tongues of flame,
> Quiver in smoky heat. We slowly passed
> Loud building-yards, where every ship contained
> A mighty vessel with a hundred men
> Battering its iron sides. A cheer! a ship

In a gay flutter of innumerous flags
Slid gaily to her home. At length the stream
Broadened 'tween banks of daisies, and afar
The shadows flew upon the sunny hills;
And down the river, 'gainst the pale blue sky
A town sat in its smoke. Look backward now!
Distance has stilled three hundred thousand hearts,
Drowned the loud roar of commerce, changed the proud
Metropolis which turns all things to gold,
To a thick vapour o'er which stands a staff
With smoky pennon streaming on the air.

Emotions which are fleeting and might be forgotten, will endure in scenes and images. Here the elation and vigour of adolescence finds its 'objective correlative' in the vividly rendered city, and Smith is able to bring alive his hero's hopes by evoking it, even though the time between has been filled with despair.

While he is suffering the death of love, and his mother continues to grieve over her lost husband, the two undergo a fall into poverty and move into surroundings which seem hostile and yet in keeping with their unhappy state. There is a vivid feeling here for the shabby relics of lost grandeur, and although only the first main sentence in the following passage refers to the boy and his mother, the effect on their spirits is clearly understood from the external description:

We crept into a half-forgotten street
Of frail and tumbling house propt by beams,
And rained courts which, centuries before,
Rung oft to iron heels, - which palfreys pawed,
As down the mighty steps the Lady came
Bright as the summer morning, - peopled now
By outcasts, sullen men, bold girls who sat
Pounding sand in the sun. The day we came
The windows from which beauty leant and smiled

Were stuffed with rags, or held a withered stick
Whence foul clothes hung to dry. Beneath an arch
Two long-haired women fought; while high above
Heads thrust through broken panes, two shrill-voiced crones,
Scolded each other. Hell-fire burst at night
Through the thin rind of earth; the place was loud
With drunken strife, hoarse curses; then the cry
Of a lost woman by a ruffian felled
Made the blood stop.

In another passage which covers several pages there is presented a skilful interplay between emotion and reflection and the external details of the city. He moves from the plight of his narrator, reflections on mankind in general and his life as a city-dweller, and back again to a specific event in the hero's life. In all this the city is not simply a physical setting nor even just the most appropriate external landscape for a state of mind, it is part of the development of the poem, becomes a factor in the stream of thought and events. To begin with he tells of his everyday existence as a city-dweller and his reflections on this as the state of mankind:

For years and years continually were mine
The long dull roar of traffic, and at night
The mighty pathos of the empty streets.
I leant at midnight o'er the lonely bridge,
And heard the water slipping neath the arch
'Man flies from solitude and dwells in noise
Like one who has a pale wronged face at home
On which he dares not look; to calm his heart
The world must roar with traffic, brawl with war...'

The numbed boredom and loneliness of his own life is expressed in the epithets applied to the city: 'continually', 'long dull roar', 'mighty pathos', empty streets', 'lonely bridge'. When he comes to reflect on humanity, the simile he uses has bearing on his own guilt

about his mother 'a pale wronged face at home', and yet in perceiving the way the roar of the traffic has become some sort of universal anodyne he is expressing a truth about mankind in his time as well as suggesting the state of his own soul. Our conclusions about the youth himself have all been drawn entirely from the objective description.

There follow some lines on the release the river can give by death and then again an account of the city - this time of its growth. Although the description is sober to begin with, it seems to be moving towards some celebration of grandeur and richness, but as the imagery expands it once more embraces human suffering, returning in theme to the opening tone of the description and the state of mind of the narrator:

> Slow the city grew,
> Like coral reef on which the builders die,
> Until it stands complete in pain and death,
> Great bridges with their coronets of lamps
> Light the black stream beneath; rude ocean's flock,
> Ships from all climes, are folded in its docks;
> And every heart from its great central dome
> To farthest suburb is a darkened stage
> On which Grief walks alone.

We are led to the fact of the mother's death gradually. It is hinted at and the mood established in this powerful account of the appearance of dawn to a mind under the stress of grief. Again the movement of the imagery has a dramatic effect. In this case the opening lines of the passage create the mood, the streets are now 'strange', the squares 'pallid'. 'Each house was blind' and, as in Tennyson's dawn section in <u>In Memoriam</u> the mood is held while the noise of life begins again. Then there is a slight typographical break after which we receive the full force of the bald statement of the

fact of death. Tennyson may well have influenced this passage, but Smith here seems to me to be his match in creation of mood and atmosphere through details of the city:

> How strange
> When the dull morn was breaking in the east
> Look'd the familiar streets! In pallid squares
> I stood awestruck like a bewildered soul
> In the great dawn of death. Each house was blind
> Closed 'gainst the light, and slow it filled the street,
> Unsoiled by smoke, unscared by any sound;
> It entered trembling rude and haggard lanes
> Where riot but an hour before had brawled
> Himself to rest. St Stephen's golden vane
> Burned in the early beam, which glimmered down,
> Making the old spire gay. The swallows woke,
> And jerked and twittered in the shining air;
> Broad labour turned and muttered in his sleep;
> And the first morning cart began to roll.
>
> I saw a son weep o'er a mother's grave.[13]

When John Davidson, another Scot, came to write of a mother's leath some years later he must surely have been influenced in some ay by Smith's use of the city landscape as the appropriate orrelative to a blank and bewildered grief. As we shall see, avidson's poem may well have inspired some of The Waste Land. It lso seems very likely that James Thomson (BV) will have read Smith. n him, as in Smith, we find the ability to use the city landscape eightened by an extreme emotional state to put across not only a ood or feeling, but also a philosophical position. Certain kinds f imagery are becoming established in association with specific tates of mind, and the relation to the urban scene is coming to be two-way process; the city helps to create the situation for which ts imagery becomes the most appropriate symbol.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. Arthur Hugh Clough, 'Review of some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold', Prose Remains, edited by his wife, (1888), p. 359.
2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh (1856), Poetical Works, (London, 1890), Vol. VI.
3. Robert Buchanan, 'George Crabbe', in David Gray and Other Essays Chiefly on Poetry, (London, 1868), p. 37.
4. Buchanan, 'On Mystic Realism', Poetical Works, (London, 1874), Vol. III, p. 317.
5. Ibid, pp. 319-20.
6. Buchanan, 'On my Own Tentatives', David Gray and Other Essays, p. 311.
7. Charles Mackay, Forty Years' Recollections, (London, 1877).
8. Buchanan, 'On my Own Tentatives', op. cit., p. 309.
9. Buchanan, London Poems, (London, 1866).
10. Buchanan, 'On my Own Tentatives', op. cit., pp. 303-4.
11. Alexander Smith, A Life Drama (1852), Poetical Works, ed. William Sinclair, (Edinburgh, 1909).
12. J. H. Buckley, The Victorian Temper, (Harvard, 1951), Ch. III.
13. Smith, City Poems, (Cambridge, 1857).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT

In James Thomson's The City of Dreadful Night, published in the 1870s, the city is transformed into a phantasmagoric landscape of utter despair. Many of the features already noted - the essential isolation of the individual, hostile physical surroundings, a stifling sense of monotony, the dark river tempting the inhabitants to death - are presented in a setting which is both recognisable and alien. Thomson has combined major developments in nineteenth century thought with the age's most common environment and yet the poem is like nothing else produced by a Victorian.

Much of the nightmare quality depends on the presence of the familiar and the fantastic side by side. If Buchanan is the Wordsworth of the city, Thomson is its Coleridge. When Coleridge complained that his own contributions to Lyrical Ballads came to seem 'an interpolation of heterogeneous matter'[1] he was making an observation which could as well be applied to his place in the whole body of English Romantic poetry. Except possibly by writers in France and America, the gift exercised by Coleridge, of giving a credibility to the supernatural was not one developed with as much enthusiasm as that of heightening the natural world or man's emotions in confronting it. Thomson is one of the very few writers in England who developed Coleridge's techniques further, to deal with contemporary subject matter.

He symbolised certain aspects of man's real existence in the city by means of an uncanny re-creation of its physical features in such a manner that it became a city that never was. But in doing

so he produced an image which powerfully affected the way readers looked at the real city thereafter:

> The street-lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms,
> Amidst the soundless solitudes immense
> Of ranged mansions dark and still as tombs.
> The silence which benumbs or strains the sense
> Fulfils with awe the soul's despair unweeping:
> Myriads of habitants are ever sleeping,
> Or dead, or fled from nameless pestilence!

Before examining the poem in detail it is of interest to trace some of the forces which went to produce this unique work. Certain vacillations and contradictions in Thomson's character, certain tensions which were never really resolved can be seen in their several parts in the body of his work as a whole and find their ultimate expression in The City of Dreadful Night. We have to reconcile the man who was a frequent visitor to the grave of Lamb, with the man who produced the work which Melville described as 'the modern book of Job'.[2]

Thomson was born in 1834 of Scots parents. His mother was a faithful devotee of the preacher Edward Irving and remained so even after he was driven out of the kirk. Thomson recalls his portrait at home and 'some books of his on the interpretation of prophecy which I used to read for the imagery'.[3] If, as is likely, he was taken to hear Irving preach, there is one theme in particular which may well have been impressed on his mind. In The Spirit of the Age, Hazlitt, besides recalling the compelling appearance of the man and his range of intellect, mentions the objects of his most fervent criticism:

> He literally sends out a challenge to all London in the name of the KING OF HEAVEN, to evacuate its streets, to disperse its population, to lay aside its

> employments, to burn its wealth, to renounce its vanities and pomp; and for what? - that he may enter in as the King of Glory; or after enforcing his threat with the battering-ram of logic, the grape-shot of rhetoric, and the cross-fire of his double vision, reduce the British metropolis to a Scottish heath, with a few miserable hovels upon it, where they may worship God according to the root of the matter, ... It is not very surprising that when nearly the whole mass and texture of Civil society is indicted as a nuisance, and threatened to be pulled down as a rotten building ready to fall on the heads of the inhabitants, that all classes of people run to hear the crash, and to see the engines and levers at work which are to effect this laudable purpose. What else can be the meaning of our Preacher's taking upon himself to denounce the sentiments of the most serious professors in great cities, as vitiated and stark-naught, of relegating religion to his native glens, and pretending that the hymn of praise or the sight of contrition cannot ascend acceptably to the throne of grace from the crowded street as from the barren rock or silent valley? Why put this affront upon his hearers? Why belie his own aspirations? 'God made the the country, and man made the town,' So says the poet; does Mr Irving say so? If he does, and finds the air of the city death to his piety why does he not return home again?[4]

In the service of his own understanding of the truth, and in is own medium Thomson was later to 'evacuate the streets', disperse its population' and 'lay aside its employments' to pro-uce a city significantly void of inhabitants and scattered about ith great ruins.

The circumstances of Thomson's adult life also help to account or his vision of the city as a hostile environment. Until his late wenties when he was dismissed from the army he had led a fairly

protected life. But after that he was forced to earn a living in London, working for years as a low-paid clerk. Attempts to escape by taking up posts abroad were a failure - he always found himself back in the city, like the doomed figures of his poem. His other means of escape, through drink, only made his economic position even more precarious, for as his bouts of alcoholism increased he was not considered a good employee. Like his successor, John Davidson, who was similarly brought up in a rigid Scots tradition and later forced to scrape a living in the Metropolis, the place was an economic desert whose features became representative of the forces which oppressed and constantly threatened him with poverty and possible starvation.

As a young man of 19, Thomson suffered the death of his father, his only remaining parent, in the same year as that of a young girl to whom he had become very attached. The theme of a lost, dead love appears constantly in his work and occasionally as a 'Laura' or 'Beatrice' figure; in other places his work shows the presence of a female figure like a Jungian 'anima', haunting, guiding, explaining. Although early biographers probably made too much of the attachment and Thomson's reaction to her death,[5] it seems likely that he, like Tennyson, absorbed this specific source of grief into a more generalised melancholy, and that this became fruitful, rather than debilitating for his poetry.

A further intensification of Thomson's melancholy probably resulted from his failure to solve what was for him as for many of his contemporaries the important question of how to identify with his fellow men. The problem can be traced throughout his work. While forced to become one of the toiling masses, he experienced very acutely the sense of estrangement both from his fellow men and

from his surroundings, which we have noted in Blake and Wordsworth. He vacillated between times when he resolved to become one with the rest of humanity, and periods of complete withdrawal.

The City of Dreadful Night seems to be the final terrible admission that he is essentially alone, but earlier works show him attempting to take up the idea of brotherhood. A poem called 'The Doom of a City' written in 1857 tells of a man who leaves a 'real' city to discover an imaginary one which is horrifying in its emptiness. He learns that the sins of the people have caused its desolation. These sins are those we might have expected from one with Thomson's particular kind of religious background - Vanity, Self-indulgence and Idleness, but the narrator learns in addition, from the chilling silence of the place, that he was wrong to cut himself off from his fellow-men. The real city from which he sets out on his voyage is described as dead and empty, but only metaphorically; we understand that it is the narrator's loneliness and an aloof contempt which colour the description. He leaves his house at night, unable to sleep, and the description has features which anticipate The City of Dreadful Night:

> I paced through desert streets, beneath the gleam
> Of lamps which lit my trembling life alone;
> Like lamps sepulchral which had slowly burned
> Through sunless ages, deep and undiscerned,
> Within a buried City's maze of stone;
> Whose peopling corpses, while they ever dream
> Of birth and death - of complicated life
> Whose days and months and years
> Are wild with laughters, groans, and tears,
> As with themselves and Doom
> They wage, with loss or gain, incessant strife,
> Indeed, lie motionless within their tomb,
> All still, and buried deep
> For ever in death's sleep,
> [illegible]e quiet lamps amidst the breathless gloom.

But the doomed city to which he travels has the characteristic of emptiness to a very intensified degree. As in the later 'City', Thomson has given the impression of an 'enchanted' place whose nature is the direct result of supernatural ordinance. Here he does so by creating images from the world of imagination, from his reading (perhaps from 'Kubla Khan'), together with an exaggerated version of the conditions which he could have experienced in his own city:

> A city lay, thick-zoned with solemn green
> Of foliage massed upon the steeps around.
> Between those mast-lines flamed the crystal fires
> Of multitudinous windows; and on high
> Grand marble palaces and temples, crowned
> With golden domes and radiant towers and spires,
> Stood all entranced beneath that desert sky,
> Based on an awful stillness. Dead or dumb,
> That mighty City through the breathless air
> Thrilled forth no pulse of sound, no faintest hum
> Of congregated life in street and square.

He discovers that all the people have been turned to stone and this leads him to reflect on the vanity of his own isolation from his fellow men in his misery. His cries of amazement at this isolation are expressed in the sort of terms which we might have expected from Lamb or Locker-Lampson:

> I shut myself up from the lives around me,
> Eating my own foul heart - envenomed food;
> And while dark shadows more and more enwound me,
> Nourished a dreary pride of solitude;
> The cords of sympathy which should have bound me
> In sweet communion with earth's brotherhood,
> I drew in tight and tighter still around me,
> Strangling my best existence for a mood.
> What - Solitude in midst of a Great City,

In midst of crowded myriads brimmed with life!
When every tear of anguish or of pity,
When every shout of joy and scream of strife,
When every deed and word and glance and gesture,
Every emotion, impulse, secret thought
Pent in the soul from all material vesture,
Through all those myriads spread and interwrought.

He goes on to condemn the 'dire Vanity' which had made him 'think to break the union / That interweaveth strictly soul with soul' and sees the doomed city as the epitome of solitude:

But this is Solitude, O dreadful Lord!
My spirit starves in this abysmal air -

Thomson did not suddenly forget his melancholy and become a highly gregarious being, nor did he plunge enthusiastically into philanthropic or reformist activity. The continuation, even intensification of his grief and solitude is described in 'A Lady of Sorrow', which will be discussed later in this chapter. This was a prose piece in four parts, written in 1862 and 1863.

The 1860s were a very prolific period for Thomson. One of the conflicts which sparked off poetry was the question of religion, and this too was related to the problem of identification with his fellow men. In 'Vane's Story', written in 1864, he comes to this conclusion:

Now my gross, earthly, human heart
With man and not with God takes part;
With men, however vile, and not
With seraphim I cast my lot:
With those poor ruffian thieves, too strong
To starve amidst our social wrong,
And yet too weak to wait and earn
Dry bread by honest labour stern;
With those poor harlots steeping sin
With shame and woe in vitriol-gin.[7]

Although this poem among others of Thomson's was published in the National Reformer and seems from these lines to be suggesting that he will take the same poetic course as Buchanan or Mackay, Thomson did not in fact concern himself with any of those movements designed to alleviate the lot of 'ruffian thieves' or harlots. His connections with the National Reformer for which he came to write regularly were as a free-thinker and eventually an atheist, and the paper itself was generally more interested in reforming people's ideas than their economic conditions. The poems Thomson did write about ordinary people during this period show an awareness of social miseries but seem designed to lift the people out of their dreary state for a while and celebrate the consolations to be found in the city. In this sense they are true 'Cockney' poems, idylls of the same light spirit as the poems of Locker-Lampson, but written as if for, as well as about the 'lower' strata of society. One such is 'Low Life - Overheard on the Train' in which a sempstress is heard describing her life and the girls she works with to her young man, a clerk. One of the girls has died in the workshop. The others have not time to tend her or later to go to her funeral for they have an order to finish.

> 'Poor Mary! she didn't fear dying, she said,
> Her father drinks and her mother is dead;
> But she hoped that in Heaven the white garments wear
> For ever; no fashion and dressmaking There.'[8]

The clerk reassures her that he is working hard and will get promotion and save her from a similar fate. 'Polycrates on Waterloo Bridge' describes a young man again a clerk probably, lightheartedly sacrificing his pipe to the waters of the Thames. 'Sunday up the River' and 'Sunday at Hampstead', both written in 1865, the same year as the above, describe outings on the one day when city workers

are free to escape it. The former is a very lighthearted piece consisting of a number of easy and superficial exercises on the themes of love, fine weather and rowing on the river. But 'Sunday at Hampstead' while rejoicing in the freedom of the day, reminds us forcefully of the weekday world from which the lovers have temporarily escaped. The poem is described as 'An idle idyll by a very humble member of the great and noble London mob' who celebrates the day and the view of distant London but also vividly presents it as the place in which they work:

> This is the Heath of Hampstead,
> There is the dome of Saint Paul's
> Beneath on the serried housetops,
> A chequered lustre falls:
>
> And the mighty city of London,
> Under the clouds and the light,
> Seems a low wet beach, half shingle,
> With a few sharp rocks upright. ...
>
> Through all the weary week, dear,
> We toil in the murk down there,
> Tied to a desk and a counter,
> A patient, stupid pair!

A little later in the poem, his description of their working lives approaches something like the terrible vision of The City of Dreadful Night:

> Was it hundreds of years ago my Love,
> Was it thousands of miles away,
> That two poor creatures we know, my Love,
> Were toiling day by day;
> Were toiling weary, weary,
> With many myriads more,
> In a City dark and dreary
> On a sullen river's shore?

Was it truly a fact or a dream, my Love?
I think my brain still reels,
And my ears still throbbing seem, my Love,
With the rush and clang of wheels;
Of a vast machinery roaring
For ever in skyless gloom;
Where the poor slaves peace imploring
Found peace alone in the tomb.[9]

Although the poem returns to a light, almost facetious tone, the later verses have nothing like the impact of these lines. Even in an 'idle idyll' the oppressive nature of the city comes through very strongly. It is interesting that Thomson should here be showing the existence of a man who works hard for a small living as an aspect of Inferno. It is not stated specifically in The City of Dreadful Night, where the concrete and factual is abstracted and conveyed in one great metaphor, but Thomson's great admirer, John Davidson, was to develop this theme of the struggling member of the 'great and noble London mob', often in much the same style as Thomson himself.

It is doubtful whether many of the London mob would have read what Thomson had to write about them, whatever his intentions, and the aloofness which seems fundamental to his social outlook is scarcely disguised. He probably belongs to the numbers of those like Buchanan, who realised during the sixties that they must extend their subject matter to include a sympathetic treatment of the masses, but were in some confusion as to who they were really writing for. In fact their readership was almost entirely middle-class, and they reflect a middle-class view of the people they write about. When a contemporary conveyed to Thomson a woman's criticism of the colours of a rower's costume, 'he replied with a slight sneer "do they think I ever went boating in that style? I write what I have seen."'[10] Whether this sneer reflects social

snobbery or a sense of spiritual superiority is not clear, but it is certain that Thomson sees himself as an observer, not as a participant.

While he was in the midst of writing these lighter pieces, Thomson also wrote a poem on Blake which found its way into print later as the conclusion of an essay on him. The essay, an enthusiastic account of Blake's directness and simplicity, is quite different in tone and content from the poem. The poem sets Blake as a figure of tragic isolation among human beings from whom he is completely cut off. It is worth quoting in full as crystallizing the sense of total isolation in the city which is such an important component of The City of Dreadful Night:

> He came to the desert of London town
> Grey miles long;
> He wandered up and he wandered down,
> Singing a quiet song.
>
> He came to the desert of London town,
> Mirk miles broad;
> He wandered up and he wandered down,
> Ever alone with God.
>
> There were thousands and thousands of human kind
> In this desert of brick and stone;
> But some were deaf and some were blind,
> And he was alone.
>
> At length the good hour came; he died
> As he had lived alone:
> He was not missed from the desert wide,
> Perhaps he was found at the Throne.[11]

Here as in The City of Dreadful Night Thomson has created an effect of the 'unreal'. It is not only that he has exaggerated Blake's isolation according to our knowledge, but he has also turned him into an archetypal wanderer, using the metaphor of the 'desert' to

heighten this effect, so that we have at one and the same time the image of the streets, the bricks and stones of the real London, and the image of the wanderer in the desert. The ballad-form also helps to create the effect of myth.

After the 1860s Thomson abandoned any attempt to show communion with his fellow men in his poetry, and he gradually gave up the hope or belief in any benevolent force in the universe. After he had completed The City of Dreadful Night he sent a copy to George Eliot, who, in her letter of thanks, expressed her admiration for 'the distinct vision and grand utterance', but hopes that his vision will become less isolated.

> Also I trust that an intellect informed by so much passionate energy as yours will soon give us more heroic strains with a wider embrace of human fellowship in them - ... To accept life and write much fine poetry is to take a very large share in the quantum of human good, and seems to draw with it necessarily some recognition, affectionate and even joyful, of the manifold willing labours which have made such a lot possible.[12]

In his reply, Thomson feared her trust might prove to be misplaced. He shows a deep fatalism and, in the face of this, no hope at all in reform movements:

> I have no Byronic quarrel with my fellows, whom I find all alike crushed under the iron yoke of Fate, and few of whom I can deem worse than myself, while so many are far better, and I certainly have an affectionate and even joyful recognition of the willing labours of those who have striven to alleviate our lot, though I cannot see that all their efforts have availed much against the primal curse of our existence.[13]

Thomson sees himself like Blake, alone. The way in which London both aggavated his solitude and came in a way to represent it, is clearly described in a prose work 'A Lady of Sorrow' written in the early 1860s. It provides the basic material for The City of Dreadful Night. It purports to come from his friend, 'Vane', and is a strange account of the way in which sorrow, personified as a woman, haunts the writer, at first as a constant companion who distracts him from the world around him, then in a nightmare sequence as a siren, who is described in strangely fin de siècle terms then finally as a shadow, a figure like Keats's Moneta who tells him the truth of the world as it is. The first part, 'The Angel' begins with the dramatic statement, 'I lived in London, and alone'. He explains that although surrounded by many people, his preoccupation with grief makes him oblivious of them. Here the city landscape is simply annihilated by his obsession:

> As I passed daily through the streets, my eyes must have pictured the buildings and the people, my ears must have vibrated to the roar of the vehicles; but my inward vision was fixed the while on her, my inward ear was attentive to her voice alone. Scarcely at night, when I went up with her to the solitude of my room, or wandered with her through the deserted thoroughfares and environs, were we more perfectly alone than amidst the noise and glare of the populous day. Indeed we were often by day the most inviolably alone, when the besieging armies of the perceptions of the outward world had driven us to take refuge in the far security of the innermost citadel of my soul. She annihilated so utterly from me the mighty metropolis, whose citizens are counted by millions, that the whole did not even form a dark background for the spiritual scenes and personages her spells continually evoked.

In the second section, 'The Siren' the world around him refuses to

be shut out completely, but now his obsession transforms it into unreal shapes. He suggests that this is the only way in which they can become tolerable:

> The unutterable want, wretchedness, ignorance, folly, the unfathomable crime and sin of the awful metropolis would have intolerably crushed my spirit with the oppression of their substantial reality - my spirit already faint to the verge of death in its own dearth of love-sustenance; but the fever of its famine transmuted them all with shapes in which they were embodied, into fantastic delirious dreams. The world was a great theatre ...

He goes on to describe the masqueraders in the great theatre as being unaware that they are performing their tricks:

> for the inextinguishable laughter of that supreme Fate, beneath whom in secret they cowered with awe and terror; beholding deep down in the dark abysses of contemplation an enormous stone idol, dumb, blind, dead, pitiless, passionless, eternal; and beside it the laws of doom and destiny graven on tables of stone; as if the God and his ordinances had been petrified into immutability in the instance of cosmic creation.

This notion is developed more thoroughly in The City of Dreadful Night. In the final section, 'The Shadow', the real world finally asserts itself and it is in confronting this that he has his final vision of the truth. There are extended passages of description in which he wanders about the city and finds an identification with his fellow men only so far as they seem to represent the misery he feels. We may be reminded of Blake's 'I wander through each charter'd street, / There where the chartered Thames doth flow, / And mark in every face I meet, / Marks of weakness, marks of woe.'

> And I wandered about the City, the vast Metropolis which was become as a vast Necropolis, desolate as a Pariah; ... desolate indeed I was, although ever and anon, here and there, in wan haggard faces, in wrinkled brows, in thin compressed lips, in drooping frames, in tremuous gestures, in glassy hopeless eyes, I detected the tokens of brotherhood, I recognised my Brethren in the great freemasonry of sorrow.

The 'anima' is now neither angel nor siren, simply a pervasive shadow who seems to be with him in all his wanderings through the streets. I quote a passage of some length now to show how Thomson has kept faithfully to the true features of the world around him, and yet by a word or expression here and there, by the selection of this feature or that, by the creation of stage-effects, above all by the projection of his isolation so that the external world is seen to be causing it, he has created a haunting, almost unreal landscape.

> At first she used to lead me, and still she often leads me, hour after hour of dusk and night through the interminable streets of this great and terrible city. The ever-streaming multitudes of men and women and children, mysterious fellow-creatures of whom I know only that they <u>are</u> my fellow-creatures - and even this knowledge is sometimes darkened and dubious - overtake and pass me, meet and pass me; the inexhaustible processions of vehicles rattle and roar in the midst; lamp beyond lamp and far clusters of lamps burn yellow above the paler cross shimmer from brilliant shops, or funereally measure the long vistas of still streets, or portentously surround the black gulphs of squares and graveyards silent; lofty churches uplift themselves blank, soulless, sepulchral, the pyramids of this mournful desert, each conserving the Mummy of a Great King in its heart; the sky overhead lowers vague and obscure; the moon and stars when

> visible shine with alien coldness, or are as wan earthy spectres, not radiant rejoicing spheres whose home is in the heavens beyond the firmament. The continuous thunders, swelling, subsiding, resurgent, the innumerable processions, confound and overwhelm my spirit, until as of old, I cannot believe myself walking awake in a substantial city among real persons.

Some of this finds its way almost verbatim into the poem, but the final transformation into vision is needed, and this process is described a few lines later when as he puts it, the Shadow interweaves herself within him and his senses become confused until he sees what is not there:

> As my eyes fix and dilate into vision more entranced of the supreme and awful mystery, the browbrain upon my eye expands and protends into a vast shadowy theatre for processions more multitudinous and solemn. The lamps withdraw and ascend, and become wayward meteors of the night; the night itself grows very dark, yet wherever I gaze I can discern, seeing by darkness as commonly we see by light; the houses recede and swell into black rock-walls and shapeless mounds of gloom; the long street is a broad road levelled forthright from world's end to world's end.[14]

He then sees the whole of humanity in a strange, solemn procession, and with them an image prefiguring the Melancholia of The City of Dreadful Night. After that the shadow speaks of destiny, recites melancholy passages from Shakespeare and Keats and adds a few words of her own praising death and affirming Fate and final oblivion.

The processes whereby the perceptions of the city in this prose work are strangely distorted in a combination of the writer's own grief and the oppressive nature of the city itself, offer valuable clues to the composition of The City of Dreadful Night. And yet it is one of the strengths of the poem that however

fantastic the world he has created it entirely convinces; he has produced the conditions to suspend our disbelief. In doing this he is able to put across certain truths, as he sees them, of the real world.

A number of features of The City of Dreadful Night symbolise Thomson's experience of the real city, creating at the same time the uncanny, supernatural effect which makes the poem so compelling. We learn that the sun never visits the place: when day comes the city disappears. It is not a ruined city but all around are the ruins of the recent past - suggesting perhaps some of the dead ideas Thomson had made such efforts to destroy for others as they were destroyed for himself - and although street lamps burn all night the streets are almost entirely empty. The silence is one of its most overpowering features and here of course we have a strong symbol of the isolation Thomson has always stressed. There are other figures but they too represent an extreme alienation:

> The city is not ruinous, although
> Great ruins of an unremembered past,
> With others of a few short years ago
> More sad, are found within its precincts vast.
> The street-lamps always burn; but scarce a casement
> In house or palace front from roof to basement
> Doth glow or gleam athwart the mirk air cast.
>
> The street-lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms,
> Amidst the soundless solitudes immense
> Of rangèd mansions dark and still as tombs.
> The silence which benumbs or strains the sense
> Fulfills with awe the soul's despair unweeping:
> Myriads of habitants are ever sleeping,
> Or dead, or fled from nameless pestilence!
>
> Yet as in some necropolis you find
> Perchance one mourner to a thousand dead,

So there; worn faces that look deaf and blind
Like tragic masks of stone. With weary tread,
Each wrapt in his own doom, they wander, wander,
Or sit foredone and desolately ponder
Through sleepless hours with heavy drooping head.

Thomson had been deeply impressed by Dante and his and other classical representations of hell are evoked. 'They leave all hope behind who enter there' we learn at one point, confirming that this is indeed Thomson's Inferno.

The use of stage effects and the poem's dramatic power in general, together with the juxtaposition of the recognisable and the impossible make this a dream landscape, but always with the horrifying sense of significance about the real world which makes certain dreams seem not an escape from the everyday life but a commentary on it. One example of the dream technique is the way Thomson has made the city like London in setting but a London either long before or long after civilisation:

A river girds the city west and south,
The main north channel of a broad lagoon,
Regurging with the salt tides from the mouth;
Waste marshes shine and glister to the moon
For leagues, then moorland black, then stony ridges;
Great piers and causeways, many noble bridges,
Connect the town and islet suburbs strewn.

Upon an easy slope it lies at large,
And scarcely overlaps the long curved crest
Which swells out two leagues from the river marge.
A trackless wilderness rolls north and west.
Savannahs, savage woods, enormous mountains,
Bleak uplands, black ravines with torrent fountains;
And eastward rolls the shipless sea's unrest.

Another 'dream' device is to introduce the important figures, those who are to tell things, suddenly, dramatically, without naming or

preliminary description, as:

> Because he seemed to walk with an intent
> I followed him;

Much of the effect comes from the occasional sharp description of the city in terms which are entirely recognisable. The streets, lanes and squares of a real city are then only slightly exaggerated in their most horrible aspects, but then again, almost imperceptibly the weird, Gothic atmosphere returns:

> Although light burns along the empty streets;
> Even when moonlight silvers empty squares
> The dark holds countless lanes and close retreats;
> But when the night its sphereless mantle wears
> The open spaces yawn with gloom abysmal,
> The sombre mansions loom immense and dismal,
> The lanes are black as subterranean lairs.
>
> And soon the eye a strange new vision learns:
> The night remains for it as dark and dense,
> Yet clearly in this darkness it discerns
> As in the daylight with its natural sense;
> Perceives a shade in shadow not obscurely,
> Pursues a stir of black in blackness surely,
> Sees spectres also in the gloom intense.
>
> The ear, too, with the silence vast and deep
> Becomes familiar though unreconciled;
> Hears breathings as of hidden life asleep,
> And muffled throbs as of pent passions wild,
> Far murmurs, speech of pity or derision;
> But all more dubious than the things of vision,
> So that it knows not when it is beguiled.

Images of pure imagination may then take over. One of the truth tellers has been in the desert, but this is not the desert of John the Baptist or of Christ's temptation, rather a place more like the setting for Browning's 'Childe Roland' or Yeats's 'rough beast'.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
As I came through the desert: On the left
The sun arose and crowned a broad crag-cleft;
There stopped and burned out black, except a rim,
A bleeding eyeless socket, red and dim;
Whereon the moon fell suddenly south-west,
And stood above the right-hand cliffs at rest:
Still I strode on austere;
No hope could have no fear.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
As I came through the desert: From the right
A shape came slowly with a ruddy light;
A woman with a red lamp in her hand,
Bareheaded and barefooted on that strand;
O desolation moving with such grace!
O anguish with such beauty in thy face!
I fell as on my bier,
Hope travailed with such fear.

From the strange nameless figures who haunt the poem, the narrator is presented with certain ideas, such as that those without hope have none to abandon, that 'Our life's a cheat, our death a black abyss', that there is no God, only Fate ruling men's lives. At one stage he witnesses a procession entering a large cathedral, and each man when challenged proves to have attempted some way of alleviating misery, either his own, or in some cases that of humanity. Each has learned that his efforts are delusions. Working for reforms it is suggested is as much a dream as acting comedy, taking opium, praying and fasting, preaching or working as painter or poet. Each concludes, 'I wake from daydreams to this real night.'[15]

Much of the poem's effectiveness lies in its directness of expression, combined with a rhetorical grandeur in the choice of vocabulary. Although the poem is allegorical, one extended metaphor

in which the truth is represented by the image of the nightmare city, the texture of language used is not densely metaphorical, but clear and straightforward. Each fresh image comes with the fullest possible impact. George Eliot spoke of the 'distinct vision and grand utterance' Thomson had achieved. Throughout his life as a poet and critic Thomson had praised simplicity and clarity of style. One of his most eloquent descriptions of these qualities comes in an essay on Whitman which was published in the National Reformer in the same year as The City of Dreadful Night. It concludes with these words:

> The greatest poet has less of a marked style, and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance, or effect, or originality, to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in my way, not the richest curtains. What I tell, I tell precisely for what it is. Let who may exalt or startle, fascinate or soothe, I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has, and be as regardless of observation. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition.[16]

The powerful lucidity of expression that Thomson is describing here is characteristic of his own work. I think Thomson may well have been influenced by both Whitman and Melville in his writing, for it shares with theirs the same broad confidence in dealing with ranges of intellectual exploration well beyond those of most of his fellow countrymen. In contrast with his appreciation of both great American writers (whom he seems to have been reading and admiring long before the majority of English readers) his criticismsof Tennyson is at the same time a criticism of his fellow countrymen:

> ... nothing gives one a keener insight into the want of robustness in the educated English intellect of the age than the fact that nine-tenths of our best-known literary men look upon him as a profound philosopher.[17]

Thomson saw himself as part of the tradition of poets who were also radical, searching thinkers. His adopted name Bysshe Vanolis (BV) is a tribute to the thought of Shelley and Novalis.

In 1872 Thomson spent eight months in America, which he enjoyed; the surroundings offered a very strong contrast to the city of London. One critic[18] claims that he then read Melville and Whitman for the first time but in fact an essay on Charles Kingsley written in 1865 refers to Melville's Mardi and not in the manner of one unfamiliar with his work in general. It does seem likely, however, that Thomson refuelled his enthusiasm for Melville while in America, and it was almost immediately after he returned to London that he added certain sections to The City of Dreadful Night. These are the passages which describe the scene in a cathedral where silent figures await a preacher who finally assures them boldly, 'There is no God.' The scene is set as follows:

> Large glooms were gathered in the mighty fane,
> With tinted moongleams slanting here and there;
> And all was hush: no swelling organ-strain,
> No chant, no voice or murmuring of prayer;
> No priests came forth, no tinkling censers fumed,
> And the high altar space was unillumed.
>
> Around the pillars and against the walls
> Leaned men and shadows; others seemed to brood
> Bent or recumbent in secluded stalls.
> Perchance they were not a great multitude
> Save in that city of so lonely streets
> Where one may count up every face he meets.

All patiently awaited the event
  Without a stir or sound, as if no less
Self-occupied, doom stricken, while attent.
  And then we heard a voice of solemn stress
From the dark pulpit, and our gaze there met
Two eyes which burned as never eyes burned yet.

In Moby Dick the whalers' chapel is described in these terms:

> A muffled silence reigned, only broken at times by the shrieks of the storm. Each silent worshipper seemed purposely sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable. The chaplain had not yet arrived; and there these silent islands of men and women sat steadfastly eyeing several marble tablets, with black borders, masoned into the wall on either side of the pulpit.

The atmosphere of the chapters about the chapel and Father Mapple and his sermon is melancholy, as the worshippers and Ishmael brood on the blows Fate has dealt and might deal in the future. But when Father Mapple speaks it is in exhilerating tones, as he invokes the courage to stand for the truth:

> 'Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a Gale! Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appal! Woe to him whose good name is more to him than goodness! Woe to him who, in this world, courts not dishonor! Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation! Yea, woe to him who, as the great Pilot Paul has it, while preaching to others is himself a castaway!
>
> ...
>
> 'Delight is to him - a far, far upward, and inward delight - who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth ever stands forth his own inexorable self. Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him, when the ship of this base treacherous world has

> gone down beneath him. Delight is to him who gives no quarter in the truth, and kills, burns and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges.'

Although Father Mapple goes on to assert a faith in God, the chapter closes with an image of him as a solitary figure who might have come from Thomson's landscape?

> He said no more, but slowly waving a benediction, covered his face with his hands, and so remained kneeling till all the people had departed, and he was left alone in the place.[19]

Besides the similarity of setting and the daring utterances of the preacher, I feel that the influence of Melville (and Whitman too in a different way) may have encouraged Thomson to render the forces of doubt in clear, unwavering language. Despair and confusion are not hesitant or apologetic in Thomson as in so many other English writers dealing with the same spiritual crises. For him the omnipotent force in the universe is Fate, a positive force which metes out suffering and death to humanity. Although there is none of the complexity and ambiguity of Moby Dick, there is the same energy and directness of language, the same ability to handle large concepts with confidence, and even, however dark the subject, a certain kind of delight. Melville called Thomson's poem,'The Modern Book of Job', a compliment which suggests a sympathetic recognition of their common aims.

Thomson's poem is the first to present the city as a strong, separate image. His sense of isolation has distanced him from his surroundings and frequently distorted them, and this has provided the necessary gap between the mind and the perceived world to allow the city to be presented as a symbol. At the same time the whole poem is itself the product of an urban environment. The effects of

the city on a powerful imagination seem to have been either to encourage fantasy of an escapist kind - into a world of pastoral or mythological and legendary material - or to transmogrify the city itself. Ruskin observed how the deadening monotony of city life led people into demanding more and more sensationalism in their art; he associated the preoccupation with death in nineteenth century literature with specifically urban tastes in reading.[20] To some extent The City of Dreadful Night is this kind of a creation - the city feeds the imagination which then disgorges it. We find the same creation of extreme, melodramatic effects in the work of Doré who had illustrated Hood's poems in the late 'sixties and was to tackle London directly as a subject during the 'seventies.

Both the poet and the engraver were artists of the 'Sublime'. Nicholas Taylor, in an article 'The Awful Sublimity of the Victorian City' has pointed out how Victorian architects deliberately set out to produce effects of awe and desolation. He argues convincingly that to those concerned with creating the urban landscape much of the city's 'ugliness' was part of its appeal. He takes quotations from Edmund Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) and shows how these gave expression to the sensibility which created many of the great country houses of the eighteenth century and the urban and industrial buildings of the nineteenth. Certain sections seem uncannily appropriate to The City of Dreadful Night:

> Terror: 'Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be embued with greatness of dimensions or not ... And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror they become without comparison greater.'

> Obscurity: 'To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes ... Almost all the heathen temples were dark ...'
>
> Privation: 'All general privations are great, because they are all terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence ...'
>
> Vastness: 'Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime ...'[21]

The origins of Thomson's 'Sublimity' probably lie in his religious background. Taylor makes an interesting connection in his article between the Sublime in architecture and rhetoric in nineteenth century religion, showing how the split in the Presbyterian church produced new buildings of grandiose, awe-inspiring dimensions. Those sermons of Irving's which Thomson probably heard when young would have met many of the demands of the Sublime as set out by Burke.

The City of Dreadful Night had a major impact on how people saw the city. Thomson created the place as a new, but recognisable symbol and gave the symbol such large, theatrical dimensions that his heightened rhetorical language seemed entirely appropriate.

Notes to Chapter Five

1. S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, (1917), Ch. XIV.
2. Herman Melville in a letter to H. S. Salt, quoted in Salt's Life of James Thomson, (1889).
3. See H. S. Salt, op. cit., p. 4.
4. William Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age, Works, edited by P. P. Howe, (1930), Vol. XI.
5. See W. Schaefer (ed.), The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery, (Berkeley, 1967).
6. James Thomson, 'The Doom of a City', Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson, edited by Anne Ridler, (London, 1963).
7. James Thomson, 'Vane's Story', Poetical Works, (1895).
8. James Thomson, 'Low Life', ibid.
9. James Thomson, 'Sunday at Hampstead', ibid.
10. Quoted by G. W. Foote, 'James Thomson II the Poet', Progress, June, 1884.
11. James Thomson, 'William Blake', Poetical Works, (1895).
12. George Elliot, letter to James Thomson, quoted in H. S. Salt, op. cit., p. 111.
13. James Thomson to George Elliot in Salt, ibid., p. 112.
14. James Thomson, 'A Lady of Sorrow', Essays and Phantasies, (1881).
15. James Thomson, The City of Dreadful Night, (1894).
16. James Thomson, 'Walt Whitman: the Man and the Poet', Biographical and Critical Studies, edited by B. Dobell, (1896).
17. ibid.
18. Schaefer (ed.), op. cit.
19. Herman Melville, Moby Dick, (1851), Chs. 7 and 9.
20. 'It might have been thought by any other than a sternly

tentative philosopher, that the denial of their natural food to human feelings would have provoked a reactionary desire for it; and that the dreariness of the street would have been gilded by dreams of pastoral felicity. Experience has shown the fact to be otherwise; the thoroughly trained Londoner can enjoy no other excitement than that to which he has been accustomed, but asks for <u>that</u> in continually more ardent or more virulent concentration; and the ultimate power of fiction to entertain him is by varying to his fancy the modes, and defining for his dulness the horrors of Death.'
John Ruskin, 'Fiction Fair and Foul', <u>Works</u>, edited by Cook and Wedderburn, Vol. 34, p. 271.

21. Quoted in Nicholas Taylor, 'The Awful Sublimity of the Victorian City', <u>The Victorian City: Images and Realities</u>, (London, 1973), Vol. 2, p. 435.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FIN DE SIECLE

I

After The City of Dreadful Night what more could be said? Here was the ultimate expression of the worst the city could offer - the misery of suicides, despair, isolation - all in imagery which turned the city itself into a powerful symbol. To say more might profane the silence Thomson had so dramatically created.

And then, suddenly it seemed, the lights turned up, colour was restored and everybody had something to say about London. It was sung in music-halls, investigated by journalists, painted, sketched and engraved by artists from overseas as well as home. Serious social investigators published their findings in steady volumes, novelists and short-story tellers explored its increasing fictional possibilities, essayists combined with illustrators to produce large prestigious books about it. On the walls of drawing-rooms there appeared bright paintings of the city the colour of jewels or more sombre ones of grey and yellow fog. And above all poets celebrated it, whether their work was to be shouted from the stage of a music-hall, recited from a stool in the Cheshire Cheese or pored over in precious editions in a drawing-room. If the fin de siècle is sometimes thought of as the era of played out romanticism and tired abstractions there were two subjects of vitality, sometimes associated - London and the Empire.

Some indication of the popularity of London as a subject at this time can be gained if we consider a selection of the work published. In 1893 Frederick Locker-Lampson's London Lyrics went into

its twelfth edition. The same year John Davidson published his first series of Fleet Street Eclogues which was to be followed by another in 1896. 1895 saw the publication of Lawrence Binyon's First Book of London Visions and Arthur Symons's London Nights. W. E. Henley's London Types came out in 1898 and Binyon's Second Book of London Visions in 1899. There were gift books and anthologies like Bits of Old Chelsea (1893) with engravings by Walter Burgess and commentary by Richard Le Gallienne and Lionel Johnson, and Henley's anthology A London Garland (1895). As well as separate volumes there were poems on the city to be found in other publications by Davidson, Henley and Symons, and pieces on London in the work of Wilde, Richard Le Gallienne, Lord Alfred Douglas, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Rhys and Stephen Phillips. Thomson's Poetical Works including The City of Dreadful Night came out in 1895 and Robert Buchanan's The New Rome in 1899. In fiction as Holbrook Jackson notes, there was a fashion for literature about the East End, Arthur Morrison's A Child of the Jago (1896) and Tales of Mean Streets (1894), Somerset Maugham's Liza of Lambeth (1897), Richard Whiteing's No 5 John Street. Booth began publication of London Labour and the London Poor in 1889. Where the city is not itself the main subject it frequently figures as a background, not just as a setting, but as having a part to play in the total emotional picture. Lionel Johnson's 'Plato in London' or Dowson's 'Benedicto Domini', for example, both isolate experiences in which the city's presence oppresses and is then transcended. Similarly the love poetry of the time will often explore the kind of relationships which seem to have been created by the city - fleeting encounters, romantic brief affairs with dancers or prostitutes. There is a general feeling that the city may still be the 'destructive element' but that poets have somehow learned how to submit themselves to it.

Why had London suddenly become acceptable, not only acceptable but almost de rigeur as a subject? It is not of course a sudden development even though the mass of material at this time would suggest an influx, but as we have seen in preceding chapters writers had gradually been establishing the subject. In different manners and from different perspectives, Locker-Lampson, Hood, Buchanan and Thomson had all helped to create the means of expression, and the different strands they represent had survived in some form into this period. Buchanan to some extent institutionalised it by using the conventional language of narrative realism to bring to a middle-class public his 'ballads of coster-mongers and their trulls'.[1] At the same time working class culture was establishing its own institutions and structures. Trade Unions were granted legal recognition and the Trades Union Congress and the First International had both been established during the 1860s. During the 1880s the Thames Embankment was seen to swarm with mass meetings of the unemployed; in 1886 these came under the organisational leadership of the Social Democratic Federation. The 1880s were also the great years of the music-hall. The tradition of street music - the ballads of current incidents in the city and of working class situations both comic and tragic - had continued, and the music-hall became one of its offshoots. Originally these halls were part of a public house, but during the 1880s and '90s special theatres were built for them. In the 1880s there were more than 500 music-halls, new or on the original premises, in central London alone.[2] The music-halls could perhaps lay claim to being one of the true examples of specifically urban culture: they not only developed to suit the entertainment needs of the city's working population, but their subject-matter celebrated every aspect of urban life. There were

songs about almost every occupation and trade, providing a sentimental or hilarious counterpart to Booth and Mayhew. Much of the material already noted in urban poetry finds expression here, the struggle to survive financially, the danger of eviction, the strong contrast between the world of the West End and that of the East, the changing face of the city. But these are less for publicity or to invoke solidarity as in the case of the ballads of industrial towns; the function here is to create a more diffuse, psychological solidarity, that of common laughter. If there are many dealing realistically with the everyday tyranny of economic facts, others celebrate the sheer delight of occasionally invading the world of the rich:

> Playing the game in the West, playing the game in the city,
> Leading the life that tells, flirting with Maude and Kitty.
> Strolling along the Strand, knocking p'licemen about,
> And I'm not going home till a quarter to ten,
> 'Cause it's my night out.[3]

As a reflection of late Victorian London there could be few more eloquent city images than that provided by the song which claims,

> And you could see the Crystal Palace
> If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between.

At the opposite end of the social scale the protected world of Frederick Locker-Lampson dallied on, with its now old-fashioned wit, formality and polished air. London Lyrics was still steadily published and its author had a certain vogue among the new generation of poets. Richard Le Gallienne, recalling those 'men in the process of literary deification', writes:

> One of the elder of these, and of the most entirely charming was Frederick Locker, later known as Locker-Lampson, whose 'London Lyrics' was already a classic of vers de société; a fascinating blend of man-about-

> town - with a marked suggestion of French elegance and esprit - country gentleman, poet, raconteur, and virtuoso, at once delicately ironical and gentle in manner, and wholly tender hearted.[4]

Locker-Lampson had been one of those who kept alive the spirit of Lamb, and this spirit - one which found in the city a comfort and reassurance - had an obvious appeal in an age of such social ferment. Lionel Johnson, part of whose poem in praise of Lamb is quoted at the beginning of Chapter Two, deliberately cultivated gestures of eighteenth century urbanity. His poem 'At The Cheshire Cheese' celebrates not the world described so vividly by Yeats in his introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, but the mood of those who paid tribute to Dr Johnson. The poem first appeared in the Johnson Club Papers for 1899. If the subject is supposed to evoke the Augustan era, the vocabulary and the movement of the verse are pure Locker-Lampson:

> The town and its taverns, the sound of the street,
> To the genuine Johnsonian, are merry and sweet.
> 'The country is sweeter,' you say, sir. Why, no, sir:
> A dull misanthropical prig may think so, sir!
> Let him babble alone of green fields at a distance:
> For us, Charing Cross's 'full tide of existence!'

Such poetry would have been assured a public not only because it perpetuated a genre in which the city was made palatable but also because it accorded with a certain cult of the eighteenth century which existed in the 1890s. Elsewhere, however, Johnson's more 'aesthetic' associations show through. A lyric 'London Town' (1891) keeping a fairly tempered Regency tone most of the way through the poem suddenly bursts into decadent colour:

> Gleaming with sunlight, each soft lawn
> Lies fragrant beneath dew of dawn;

> The spires and towers rise, far withdrawn,
> Through golden mist:
> At sunset, linger beside Thames:
> See now, what radiant lights and flames!
> That ruby burns: that purple shames
> The amethyst.[5]

Johnson is probably best known of the poets who kept alive the 'Augustan' strain. But those periodicals read in gentlemen's clubs were scattered with them here and there, magazines like The Speaker and The Saturday Review.

Something of this blandness of approach comes into the text of London - A Pilgrimage (1872) a joint venture by Blanchard Jerrold (son of the Punch reformer) and Gustave Doré. The basic attitude is best summed up in Jerrold's own words:

> London an ugly place indeed! We soon discovered that it abounded in delightful nooks and corners: in picturesque scenes and groups; in light and shade of the most attractive character. The work-a-day life of the metropolis, that to the careless or inartistic eye is hard, angular and ugly in its exterior aspects, offered up pictures at every street corner.

Doré's engravings, however, show that the 'Sublime' was not dead. In contrast to the level, sanguine tone of Jerrold, his illustrations seem apocalyptic. They veer between the paradisal world of the rich and the inferno of the poor. High society is represented in the midst of light, dressed in frothily textured clothing and surrounded by delicate foliage - the only parts of the 'Pilgrimage' where there is any foliage - sometimes anticipating the extravagances of Beardsley's illustrations to The Rape of the Lock (1895-6). But the darker side of London is more fully documented, where shadowy figures lurk under the arches of bridges, children play in squalour, prisoners tramp in an infernal circle. The use of

contrast is often extreme, as distinct from the more evenly textured illustrations of upper-class recreations. In 1870 Thomas Hood's poems had been issued with illustrations by Doré in which full use is made of the melodramatic possibilities of the subject matter. In one of the illustrations to 'The Bridge of Sighs', for example, there is a sharp contrast between the rocklike solidity of the side of the bridge in the foreground and the dramatic lighted figure of the woman, while above and beyond her the Gothic buildings, houses and a dome, are given in intricate detail. Although the urban details are not those provided by Hood, Doré has recreated the spirit of the poem by causing the eye to move at once from the central figure of the doomed woman to the elaborate architecture of the civilisation responsible for her death - the houses and ecclesiastical buildings which are clearly etched against moonlight breaking through clouds. The illustrations for the 'Song of the Shirt' include an elaborately wrought initial letter 'W' on the first page consisting of part of a shirt stuffed with a skeleton, with a price-tab reading 'This style Six for guinea'. The finial, too, has celtic-style designs incorporating another skeleton, a shirt and guardian griffins called Disease and Hunger.

In London - A Pilgrimage, the city becomes a grotesque combination of Hood and Dante, a connection which must have struck anyone familiar with his illustrations to both works. The skull motifs from the illustrations to Hood have been taken up but now the skulls are on the heads of living inhabitants of the East End. As well as the dramatic contrasts of light and dark, Doré uses the Expressionist devices of El Greco and the German Gothic masters, exaggerating the proportions of a figure for effect, usually by elongating its. Almost as eloquent as the main engravings are small figures inset

into the text; while Jerrold is evoking Derby Day for example, the figure of a flower girl in black, with an expression of blank misery, stares from the text.

'The City of Dreadful Night' survived in Doré's illustrations as well as in Thomson's poem. Buchanan, too, indicates a shift of sensibility in this direction. In 1888 he published The City of Dream. This is a long, allegorical poem dedicated to Bunyan but clearly owing a great deal to Thomson. He may have shared one of Thomson's own sources of inspiration for the central figure is a pilgrim called Ishmael and the poem involves journeys through the despair of atheism. He describes it as 'an epic of modern Revolt and Reconciliation'. Where Buchanan's earlier poetry had reflected a sensitivity to the problems created by modern urban life, but retained a fairly assured outlook, this poem indicates some confusions of belief prompted by a more extreme sense of social wrongs and reflecting the corresponding intellectual turmoil. It is significant that he chooses to present his reflections on contemporary civilisation and his fears for the future in symbols of different kinds of city. The possibilities and failures of Christianity are embodied in 'Christopolis', a dazzling creation whose architectural magnificance is offset by the beggars at the porch of every temple and by the hysteria of its crowds. Later in the pilgrimage 'The City without God' is described, a stately model of classical and Humanistic ideals, but this too is flawed, for it allows no sickness, either physical or mental, and contained within it is a madhouse for confining those who deviate and dare to believe in God. The poem is remarkable both for the confidence with which Buchanan conveys different systems of belief in terms of cities, and for the sheer descriptive exuberance with which he presents

them. We can detect here some of the bleakness of Thomson, but also, however much he may finally reject what he sees, the delight of St John the Divine.

> Upon a tract
> Of lonely stone doth stand Christopolis,
> And all around for leagues the rocks and sands
> Stretch bleak and bare; and not a bird thereon
> Flieth, save kite and crow; and here and there,
> At intervals, black Crosses point the path,
> And whitely strewn at every Cross's feet
> There bleach the bones of pilgrims who have died.
>
> But if the waste was bare around about
> What did I heed, since now at every step
> I saw the City growing fairer far;
> The spires and arches all innumerable
> Flashing their flame at heaven; a million roofs
> Of gold and silver mirroring the skies;
> Windows of pearl in sunlight glistening
> Prismatic; temples and cathedrals blent
> In one large lustre of delight and dream;[7]

In the end the pilgrim reaffirms God but it is a God who resides in oceans and mountain tops. Significantly, for Buchanan the city and the complexity of the social and intellectual problems it presents must now be rejected. This impression is intensified in his volume, The New Rome (1899), subtitled 'Poems and Ballads of our Empire', in which London is frequently compared in its decadence to the last days of Rome. He takes the opportunity of dwelling on the subjects of the decadence, prostitutes, the theatre, social contrasts, but bathes them in a very lurid light and makes frequent references to the destruction of the city. This he seems to view with the fears and the hopes of certain anticipation. In Buchanan, through his treatment of the city, we see the bridge between the vision of James Thomson (BV) and the apocalyptic prophesies of Lawrence,

Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Similar perceptions will be seen to run through the work of John Davidson.

Attitudes to the city and methods of presenting it - whether realistic, whimsical or apocalyptic - were thus fairly well established and all these approaches survive and are taken up at the end of the century. But we tend to associate the fin de siècle with a particular aesthetic, that of Whistler, Wilde and Arthur Symons and it is in their manner that the city found some of its most exciting exponents. Holbrook Jackson makes a telling remark about the 'nineties fad for urban poetry', suggesting that for many it was 'less the artistic expression of a phase of life than the expression of a phase of art',[8] and he explains that in the best sense of the word it was the art of posing.

The pose relied heavily on a cult of the artificial. The city naturally lent itself for inclusion into this cult, not only because streets, buildings and pavements were man-made but also because the culture of the city offered a world of artifice. Houses and apartments contained the precious objects, ornaments, scents and decorations of well-dressed men and women, and the theatre above all offered not only its costume, make-up and scenery but the whole theatrical alternative world of illusion, of masks and personae.

Much of this cult was Baudelaire grotesquely caricatured, as if one of the facets of his person had itself become a fashionable mask; for here, as in almost every case, the avant-garde reading of him was a misreading! Baudelaire had advocated the artificial from the depths of a religious distrust of the natural so fundamental that it seemed more like the dogma of orthodox Calvinism than Catholicism. The artificial was good for moral reasons, because it could redeem men from the evil of their basic natures:

> Fashion should thus be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathesome bric a brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain: as a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated effort at her reformation.[9]

The poets of the fin de siècle in England delighted in this paradox which would have provided them with ammunition more shocking to the English tradition in poetry with its pastoral strain than it had been to the French. The morality vanishes and it becomes an assertion of taste. In Arthur Symons's preface to Silhouettes (1892) called 'On behalf of Patchouli', the preference for the artificial also becomes explicitly a preference for the town, and the arguments of Baudelaire have been drawn into the mainstream English debate about town and country:

> I am always charmed to read beautiful poems about nature in the country. Only personally, I prefer town to country: and in the town we have to find for ourselves, as best we may, the décor which is the town equivalent of the great natural décor of fields and hills. Here it is that artificiality comes in: and if anyone sees no beauty in the effects of artificial light, in the variable, most human, and yet most factitious town landscape, I can only pity him and go o on my way.[10]

In the interests of art a battle was waged against nature, not just the nature of the pastoral but of such phenomena as the weather, of fogs and sunsets and changes of light. There is some of Baudelaire's idealism in the statements by Whistler in his lecture 'The ten o'clock', delivered in London in 1885:

> The sun blares, the wind blows from the east, the sky is bereft of cloud, and, without, all is iron. The windows of the Crystal Palace are seen from all

> points of London. The holiday-maker rejoices in the glorious day, and the painter turns aside to shut his eyes.
>
> How little this is understood, and how dutifully the casual in Nature is accepted as the sublime, may be gathered from the unlimited admiration daily produced by a very foolish sunset.
>
> The dignity of the snow-capped mountain is lost in distinctness, but the joy of the tourist is to recognise the traveller on the top. The desire to see, for the sake of seeing, is, with the mass, the one to be gratified, hence the delight in detail.
>
> And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us - then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who, for once has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master - her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.[11]

It is particular interest that for Whistler the time when 'Nature for once, has sung in tune' is the same as the time when the poets had been able to face the city, when it is transformed by dusk, fog or darkness. In the bright light of day the artist, like the poet 'turns aside to shut his eyes'. We shall find in almost all the aesthetically conscious poets of this period the same inability to present the city in day-light, but a great enthusiasm for writing about it in fog, dawn, dusk or night-time, any time when its usual appearance has been changed.

Oscar Wilde takes Whistler's arguments a stage further. Urban realism is utterly rejected: 'As for that great and daily increasing

school of novelists for whom the sun always rises in the East-End, the only thing that can be said about them is that they find life crude and leave it raw.' Wilde's gesture towards Nature is even more dismissive than Whistler's, it is not that Nature only occasionally harmonises with the artistic ideal - it lags far behind. Painters like Whistler and the Impressionists have created the city as it now appears:

> Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge. The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art. ... At present people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects.[12]

Wilde is of course taking the cult of the artificial to an absurd position, but he is also acknowledging a truth about perception. His recognition that the language of artistic expression will find sources of vitality in art itself was of central importance to the modernist aesthetic which had its origins in this period. And its application to urban themes contributed enormously to the whole genre of city poetry. Had the attitudes of Whistler and Wilde amounted merely to 'art for art's sake' their aesthetic would have been entirely self-consuming, but in their apparent perversity they were turning attention in a way that was both radical and necessary to the vital means of expression.

The effects of this approach were to help release urban poetry from the kind of deadlock caused by problems of both style and content. Now, instead of being debilitated by the difficulties urban material presented poets started to create artistic value from them. A defiant approach to stylistic problems extended to their attitude to the basic material and enabled them to cut through many of the arguments and scruples about the nature of urban subject-matter. If, for example, the city struck them as a chaos of random and confusing impressions with no unifying principle, then they would write poems consisting of images and impressions and make no attempt to find meaning. The city created in the beholder a sense of isolation, it destroyed the feelings of community; then the poets would deliberately cultivate the pose of the outsider. It eroded normal personal relationships; then they would write of the perverse, or of chance, fleeting encounters. It offered scenes of ugliness and squalour, of extreme contrasts between rich and poor; then they would make patterns of the contrasts or shun the daytime world entirely and revel in the city at night. The city was artificial, man-made; then they would make their poems into artefacts and decorate them with more artifice.

II

Wilde said that people saw fogs 'because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects'. The painters were Whistler and the French Impresionists and of the poets the most influential was Baudelaire. The urban poetry of Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Richard Le Gallienne and Arthur Symons cannot be said to have achieved in verse what the painters achieved on canvas, nor do they in any way succeed in truly emulating Baudelaire

although Arthur Symons comes closest to doing both. The importance of the foreign aesthetic influence was in effecting as Eliot put it, 'a mode of release', providing a means of seeing the material and offering possibilities of order and selection. The subject-matter of French Realist and Impressionist painters at this time may be evoked by an extract from the notebooks of Degas:

> On smoke, smoke of smokers, pipes, cigarettes, cigars, smoke of locomotives, of high chimneys, factories steamboats etc. Destruction of smoke under the bridges. Steam. In the evening. Infinite subjects. In the cafes, different values of the glass-shades reflected in the mirrors.[13]

In the 1870s urban themes were being taken up by Degas himself, Monet and Manet and by a lesser-known painter Gustave Caillebotte who is possibly the most consistent in his choice of city subjects. He differs from his fellow artists of the avant-garde in his preference for hard outlines.

An important characteristic of these artists was their ability to take up the subject of the city's working life. One of Caillebotte's better-known works is The Floor Scrapers (1875). Monet shows barges and dock-workers in Unloading Coal (1872), Degas painted The Ironers (c. 1884), Manet had presented The Street Singers (1862), in shabby, unromantic pose and in 1877-8 he painted Road Menders in the rue de Berne. We shall find evidence of this influence particularly in the early poetry of Arthur Symons.

Towards the end of this period the techniques most often associated with Impressionism were increasingly employed: the breaking up of outlines, conveying the scene as a blurred mass of different blobs of colour. Walter Benjamin has suggested that these techniques correspond to habits of perception developed in

the city, particularly those caused by the sight of moving crowds. This illuminating remark comes in a note to his essay on Baudelaire:

> The daily sight of a lively crowd may once have constituted a spectacle to which one's eyes had to adapt first. On the basis of this supposition, one may assume that once the eyes had mastered this task they welcomed opportunities to test their newly acquired faculties. This would mean that the technique of Impressionist painting, whereby the picture is garnered in a riot of dabs of colour, would be a reflection of experiences with which the eyes of a big-city dweller have become familiar. A picture like Monet's 'Cathedral of Chartres', which is like an ant-heap of stone, would be an illustration of this hypothesis.[14]

Benjamin is here writing about visual perception, but I think his remarks can be applied to some extent to poetry. Walter Bagehot had already observed how well-fitted Dickens's manner of writing was to the fragmented world of the city, and it was when poets began to reflect some of this fragmentary quality in their verse that they moved towards achieving an 'urban aesthetic'. And perhaps the Imagist movement owes as much to the urban environment of its poets and their predecessors in the 'nineties as it does to French Symbolism or Japanese haikai.

An essential characteristic of French Realist and Impressionist art is its ability to render the immediate and contemporaneous and to eschew narrative, not only in the crude sense that Pre-Raphaelite painting can be described as narrative, but in the way a picture can suggest connections between objects and figures within pictures. Impressionist painting could convey a sense of reality in its use of the random, the feeling that the painter has happened on a scene of which he has no more pre-conceptions than the world in general and

in which different figures and objects have no apparent relationships. The idea that an urban scene could be presented just because it was there and that no sense need be made of it had obvious attractions for poets caught up in the old debate, with all the pre-conceptions and values that went with it.

The painters' ability to cultivate the illusion of immediacy was by no means an abandoning of formal selectivity. One of their methods of selection was to take a city scene from above, from a balcony or upstairs window, for example. Caillebotte's Boulevard vu d'en haut (1880) and Pissarro's Avenue d'Opera (1898) are only two among many paintings of this kind which almost constitute a genre of their own. In these, the people below are given only the same value as trees or windows. Once again the city seems more manageable, artistically, above the turmoil of the streets.

The traffic in the world of art at this time between France and England did much to enrich the art of both countries. Whistler was a great carrier of ideas, the French painters not only admired the great English landscape painters but helped in their own way to re-create London with their studies of the Thames whose fogs broke up the light in a manner particularly pleasing to their taste. Constantin Guys, the painter so admired by Baudelaire had worked for the London Illustrated News. Later, Van Gogh admired the English engravers of The Graphic and was so impressed by Doré's engraving of prisoners in Newgate Gaol that he made it the basis for one of his own paintings. At the same time as this cross-channel traffic in the visual arts, there was a vitalising tendency towards interrelationships between different arts and a more fluid approach to the possibilities of different forms. The illustrations to pieces of journalism for example, were becoming an art-form in

their own right. Not only Doré but lesser known illustrators for The Graphic gave pictorial representation to documentary studies of urban themes. A painting like Sir Luke Fildes's Applications for Admission to a Casual Ward (1874) obviously owes a great deal to engravings which were being produced to accompany articles on social problems. Painting derived inspiration from music in its increasing stress on form and pattern rather than on 'subject-matter', as we see from Whistler's aesthetic theory, and from the titles he chose for his work. Poetry derived strength from all these cross-currents.

In a famous prose poem[15] Baudelaire describes himself 'bathing in multitude' immersing himself in the city's crowds and revelling in the anonymity they afford him, while at other times he rejoices in his own solitude. Both the 'solitude and multitude' afforded by the city are, he says, of value to the poet. His ability to plunge into the crowd and then withdraw recalls both Wordsworth's account in The Prelude and Lamb's rhapsodic essay 'The Londoner', and as in both these writers, Baudelaire's approach is indicative of his attitude to the city itself. Sometimes he embraces it in its entirety. At other times he is estranged and the city throws up images which his mind is unable to assimilate.

Baudelaire faithfully records both these states as well as gradations of feeling in between. His great gift is to present the city as if at the initial moment of impact and to communicate freely the responses of his own mind. Unlike Lamb or Locker-Lampson he embraces the city in all its aspects - not the restricted world of Piccadilly or the Strand or its Paris equivalents but dreary suburbs, hospitals, the poor, the old, the sick. All aræ transformed by the power of his feelings. He is a most powerful creator of

metaphors for the city but they are always metaphors which clarify the subject and make it more vivid, not the kind which obscure or disguise. Sometimes they may extend over several stanzas, or merge into new images, as if the poet is exploring all the possibilities of his subject. It was partly in this daring, almost flamboyant use of metaphor that he influenced the poets of the fin de siècle. These lines are from 'Le crepuscule du soir':

> A travers les lueurs que tourmente le vent
> La Prostitution s'allume dans les rues;
> Comme une fourmilière elle ouvre ses issues;
> Partout elle se fraye un occulte chemin,
> Ainsi que l'ennemi qui tente un coup de main;
> Elle remue au sein de la cité de fange
> Comme un ver qui derobe à l'Homme ce qu'il mange.

In Baudelaire the city is always heightened, often by the juxtaposition of a concrete metaphor with an abstract: 'Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves'. Frequently it is by reference to religious concepts; Baudelaire's Paris is often a Hell through which move figures with 'l'air éternel'. At other times it is by the close association between the city and the poet's deepest feelings:

> Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancholie
> N'a bougé! palais neuf, échafaudages, blocs,
> Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
> Et mes cher souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.

T. S. Eliot describes his particular gifts as follows in an essay on Dante:

> I think that from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed in any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric, the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic.

In his artistic theory, too, Baudelaire was influential. He wrote of 'the heroism of modern life', insisting, as English writers were, on the need for contemporary urban material, but insisting also that it must always have qualities of the permanent. His view of the redemptive powers of fashion and artifice is quoted above. In his essay on Constantin Guys he explains that beauty partakes of the eternal but has also a quality which must be of the age, 'l'époque, la mode'. The true artist of modern life like Guys, is he who from all that is ephemeral can isolate the suggestions of the timeless, contained there.

We see this principle at work in Baudelaire's poem 'Les petites vieilles'. He describes the little old ladies, once beautiful, now grotesque, whom he spies on 'dans les plis sinueux des vieilles capitales'. He follows such creatures, musing on their past glories, and on one occasion sees one of them attending a military concert in the park. The detail is 'period' but Baudelaire has rendered it timeless by associating it with the more long-established phenomenon of the effect of sunset in a city, and the universal question of old age:

> Ah! que j'en ai suivi de ces petites vieilles!
> Une, entre autres, à l'heure ou le soleil tombent
> Ensanglante le ciel de blessures vermeilles,
> Pensives s'asseyait à l'écart sur un banc,
>
> Pour entendre un de ces concerts, riches de cuivre,
> Dont les soldats parfois inondent nos jardins,
> Et qui, dans ces soirs d'or où l'on se sent revivre,
> Versent quelque héroïsme au coeur des citadins.
>
> Celle-là, droite encor, fière et sentant la règle,
> Humait avidement ce chant vif et guerrier;
> Son oeil parfois s'ouvrait comme l'oeil d'un vieil aigle;
> Son front de marbre avait l'air fait pour le laurier![17]

With few exceptions the poets of the 'nineties were unable to emulate Baudelaire, much as they tried. They took the trappings of his world, the fog, crepuscular lights, prostitutes, fashion, and imported them directly into their own poetry, happily ignoring the fact that forty years had passed and that whatever expressed the sense of the 'époque' in Baudelaire's time, already had a slightly old-fashioned air by the time they used it. They did not have his breadth of vision either spiritually or socially. But Baudelaire did create a powerful precedent of urban poetry whose air of strangeness, being written in a foreign tongue provided just that sense of dissociation to correspond to their own sense of removal from the material. And in his metaphorical ingenuity, his ability to transform the city at every turn, they found a technique which went some way to vitalise their own language when dealing with the subject.

III

When we look at those poets whose work was most obviously influenced by Baudelaire and by the Impressionists, one of their striking features is an air of artificiality. In a painting by Caillebotte or Manet or a poem by Baudelaire there is a strong sense of the actual; but these 'nineties poems seem strictly imitation. Nevertheless they convey a vital confidence in urban material, which is partly the artist's delight in the material he has chosen to work in. The reader's attention is being consciously drawn to the medium. Just as Whistler wanted people to forget about his mother and see her portrait as an arrangement of shapes and colour, so these poets are making us forget about the city to dwell instead on the metaphors and analogies in which they are presenting it.

Wilde's poem, 'Symphony in Yellow' has been put together like a model whose component parts were collected from French Impressionist salons and the apartments of dandies and connoisseurs of fine pieces:

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
And, here and there, a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay
Are moved against the shadowy wharf,
And, like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
And flutter from the Temple elms,
And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.[18]

The poet's stance is obviously one at some distance from the scene, looking down from a height, as in many French Impressionists, while the second stanza reproduces Whistlerian contrasts in yellow and grey. In both the second and final stanzas the images used are of precious objects, the silken scarf, the rod of jade. The world of fashion in art is evoked not only by the choice of yellow, but in the hints of the taste for oriental things in the butterfly and jade. This extends to the poem's construction - it moves through pairs of superimposed images as in a series of Japanese haikai. The poem has the quality of a precious object, partly in the nature of its embellishments, partly in its formal regularity and finish. There is none of the casual spontaneity associated with Impressionism, rather we are reminded how often those paintings were encased in heavy frames and hung in dark rooms gaining their effect from the very contrast this produced. In most of the shorter poems on urban

subjects by Wilde, Symons and Le Gallienne there is a desire to set the material very solidly in a formal framework. Their stanza-forms and rhyme schemes are mostly very regular and any flexibility is usually in variations of rhythm.

Richard Le Gallienne's 'A Ballad of London' shows the same propensity for artificial imagery: the lamps become 'iron lilies' and the unifying metaphor for the city itself is that of an exotic hot-house flower.

> Ah, London! London! our delight,
> Great flower that opens but at night,
> Great City of the Midnight Sun,
> Whose day begins when day is done.
>
> Lamp after lamp against the sky
> Opens a sudden beaming eye,
> Leaping alight on either hand,
> The iron lilies of the Strand.

The presence of suffering in the city is evoked simply to further the metaphor, as part of a contrast of dark and light:

> Upon thy petals butterflies,
> But at thy root, some say, there lies
> A world of weeping trodden things,
> Poor worms that have not eyes or wings.[19]

The same reducing of the city's inhabitants to meet the demands of metaphor is evident in Lord Alfred Douglas's 'Impression de Nuit', a heavily ornate poem in which the city is a rich woman, its lights are so many varieties of rich jewellery, and humanity appears only in the closing lines:

> And in her brain, through lanes as dark as death,
> Men creep like thoughts ... The lamps are like pale flowers.[20]

These poets seem content to observe the effects of colour and light as the city is transformed by sunset, dawn, moonlight, street-

lighting. The dynamics are entirely visual. Because they felt it legitimate to concentrate on such effects and not to worry about the human problems and social complexities of city life they were freed from many of the anxieties of their predecessors and we find a certain energy and enthusiasm in their exploring the possibilities of what was to them 'new' material. Three stanzas from Richard Le Gallienne's 'Sunset in the City' illustrate his complete confidence in simply 'painting a picture'. When human life is introduced in the final stanza it is filtered through Baudelaire (in an echo of 'la Prostitution s'allume dans les rues') and distanced by generalisation and clichés.

Above the town an azure sea is flowing,
'Mid long peninsulas of shining sand,
From opal unto pearl the moon is growing,
Dropped like a shell upon the changing strand.

Within the town the streets grow strange and haunted,
And dark, against the western lakes of green,
The buildings change to temples, and unwonted
Shadows and sounds creep in where day has been.

Within the town the lamps of sin are flaring,
Poor foolish men that know not what ye are!
Tired traffic still upon his feet is faring -
Two lovers meet and kiss and watch a star.

There is a very similar movement in Wilde's 'Impression du Matin', as the poem traces changes in the city's appearance at twilight, finally coming to rest on the figure of a lonely woman, presumably a prostitute:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in grey:
A barge with ochre-coloured hay
Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold

The yellow fog came creeping down
The bridges, till the houses' walls
Seemed changed to shadows and St Paul's
Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.

Then suddenly arose the clang
Of waking life; the streets were stirred
With country waggons: and a bird
Flew to the glistening roofs and sang.

But one pale woman all alone,
The daylight kissing her wan hair,
Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare,
With lips of flame and heart of stone.

The final stanza of both poems typifies this group's restricted area of human reference. Again a tendency of city life is being taken up as a theme, Baudelaire's 'A une passante' had crystallised the fleeting nature of romantic encounters in the city; no sooner have the eyes of potential lovers met than the crowd draws one of them away. In the 'nineties poets we have a sense that all love affairs set in the city are doomed - that somehow the houses, streets or crowds will intervene. Hence there is a wistfulness and poignancy, a desire to grasp eagerly what may soon be lost.

The figure of the prostitute was popular with the fin de siècle partly for this reason, and not just because she appealed to the appetite for vice and sin, an appetite more strong in the imagination of their detractors than in the writers themselves. The love she offered was quintessentially urban, it was of the streets, transitory, anonymous if necessary, alienated. The fact that relationships could be formed with prostitutes was precisely because of these qualities. Just as Impressionism expressed a city-influenced way of seeing, so such affairs expressed a corresponding way of feeling.

As long before as 1848, Rossetti had celebrated a prostitute in 'Jenny', a poem which Le Gallienne considered of greater influence on the 'nineties poets than Buchanan's London Poems.[21] Part of the appeal of his poem would have been in the piquant combination of references to her fresh, flower-like appearance suggesting innocence, and the evocation of her actual physical activity, as in the lines:

> Whose eyes are as blue skies, whose hair
> Is countless gold incomparable:
> Fresh flower, scarce touched with signs that tell
> Of Love's exuberant hotbed.

Rossetti gives her the same tender imaginative sympathy as Hood gives the victim of 'The Bridge of Sighs', but in Rossetti the feeling is altogether more intimate and familiar. Like Hood he describes her city setting, and in the metaphor at the close of this quotation produces an image curiously anticipatory of the fin de siècle:

> Jenny, you know the city now,
> A child can tell the tale there, how
> Some things which are not yet unroll'd
> In market-lists are bought and sold
> Even till the early Sunday light,
> When Saturday night is market-night
> Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
> And market-night in the Haymarket,
> Our learned London children know,
> Poor Jenny, all your pride and woe;
> Have seen your lifted silken skirt
> Advertise dainties through the dirt;
> Have seen your coach-wheels splash rebuke
> On virtue; and have learned your look
> When, wealth and health slipped past, you stare
> Along the streets alone, and there,
> Round the long park, across the bridge,
> The cold lamps on the pavement's edge
> Wind on together and apart,
> A fiery serpent for your heart.

A feeling for the prostitute became the only 'proletarian sympathy' the 'nineties poets were able to share. I think we can detect why from Rossetti's poem with its protective tone which is not very different from that of Arthur Symons fifty years later. For the poets of the 'nineties the prostitute was unlike the beggar or loafer or those masses of the unemployed who sometimes made the Thames embankment such a disconcerting daytime spectacle. She could be handled, for the simple reason that she could be bought. And although she may have come from that other world of labyrinthine dark streets and even finally end up in the inky waters of the Thames she was prepared to share for a while their world of lights and music, to wear a mask of bright paint and act as if the whole idea of a 'social problem' were a pompous absurdity.

It is mainly in the work of Symons that these attitudes are manifest, but there is a poem by Stephen Phillips, who was considered by Le Gallienne as the most successful of the poets writing about London, in which he describes a woman going to sell her body to buy food for her dying husband. As in 'Jenny', the anguish is expressed partly through her sense of a total lack of sympathy in the figures of the passing crowd:

> Faces like moths against her fly,
> Lured by some brilliance to die:
> The clerk with spirit lately dead,
> The decent clothes above him spread;
> The joyous cruel face of boys;
> These dreadful shadows proferring toys;
> The constable with gesture bland
> Conducting the orchestral strand;
> A woman secretly distrest,
> And staidly weeping, dimly drest;
> A girl, as in some torment stands,
> Offering flowers that burn her hands;

A blind man passes, that doth sound
With shaking head the hollow ground.
In showering air, the mystic damp,
The dim balm blown from lamp to lamp,
A strange look from a shredded shawl,
A casual voice with thrilling fall!
The officer from passing eye
Hustles the injured forms that lie,
Creatures we marred, compelled upright
To drift beside us in the light.[22]

Her task brings her into the same world as all these miserable beings, but communication among them is non-existent. In this poem Phillips is able to use the theme of prostitution and the piquant emotions associated with it without his heroine being in any way 'tainted'.

Wilde's poem 'The Harlot's House' is one of the most interesting treatments of this subject. He combines the idea of prostitution with the motif of a love swallowed up by the city. There is also a further development of a theme which had by then become a specifically urban subject - dawn breaking on empty streets coming as a chilling realisation of loss. In this poem Wilde's final image has several functions: it suggests the hesitancy of dawn as though the night-life of the streets were somehow a more powerful force, but it also suggests the nature of the 'love' who has passed into the 'house of lust', a timid creature entering a world she is unfitted for, rather than a cold-hearted betrayer. In so doing, Wilde has equated love and daylight, but suggested that they are fragile compared with the horrible energy of the city's nocturnal life. The reduction of human responses to meaningless mechanical gestures is powerfully suggested in the imagery of puppets and clockwork. This is not a translation into a city background of a

situation that could have happened anywhere - it is entirely a city poem. For here Wilde is doing more than painting a city-scape as in 'Impression du Matin' or 'Symphony in Yellow', he is presenting an emotional situation created by the city with total interpenetration of background and emotion.

We caught the tread of dancing feet,
We loitered down the moonlit street,
And stopped beneath the harlot's house.

Inside, above the din and fray,
We heard the loud musicians play
The 'Treues Liebes Herz' of Strauss.

Like strange mechanical grotesques,
Making fantastic arabesques,
The shadows raced across the blind,

We watched the ghostly dancers spin
To sound of horn and violin,
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

Like wire-pulled automatons,
Slim-silhouetted skeletons
Went sidling through the slow quadrille.

They took each other by the hand,
And danced a stately saraband:
Their laughter echoed thin and shrill.

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out, and smoked a cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing.

Then, turning to my love, I said,
'The dead are dancing with the dead,
The dust is whirling with the dust.'

But she - she heard the violin,
And left my side, and entered in:
Love passed into the house of lust.

Then suddenly the tune went false,
The dancers wearied of the waltz,
The shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.

And down the long and silent street,
The dawn, with silver-sandalled feet,
Crept like a frightened girl.

Lawrence Binyon was keeper of Oriental manuscripts at the British Museum, and later the author of the lines, 'They will not grow old as we that are left grow old, / Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn. / At the going down of the sun and in the morning, / We will remember them.' He also published two books of London Visions in 1895 and 1899. These seem to contain all the tendencies of city poetry up to that time. He can rhapsodise about its 'turbulent babble' or the music of its wheels in the manner of Lamb and at the same time, particularly in the second book, presents the city's unhappier inhabitants with the sensitivity of Hood or Buchanan. He can select different aspects of the city to accord with different moods of his own, informing the city landscape with his own state of mind as did Tennyson or Alexander Smith. He shares with his contemporaries a strong sense of the visual possibilities of London, although not with such direct reference to painting. He is competently in control of urban material, without the uneasiness over subject-matter that we sometimes find in the earlier poets or the stylistic self-consciousness of Wilde. In the cultural circles he moved in the establishment of London as a subject was now accepted.

This bold image from his poem 'Escape' gives an indication of the stylistic assurance now attainable by a comparatively conventional poet:

They pause: above, the northern skies
Are pale with a furnace light.
London, with upcast, sleepless eyes
Possesses the brief night.[23]

'Whitechapel High Road' indicates Binyon's aesthetic stance, an amalgamation of Doré's dramatic contrasts, more popular notions of the 'colourful and picturesque' as in Blanchard Jerrold's text for London - A Pilgrimage or a picture of a street-market in The Graphic. Colourful though his account is, his style is still very much the narrative, descriptive style of Buchanan rather than moving through the briefer images of those poets directly influenced by Impressionism. It is however more open in form.

Deaf with a vacant stillness of the tomb,
At intervals a road deserted gapes,
Where night shrinks back into her proper gloom,
Frighted by boisterous flare
Of the flame, that now through a cluster of green grapes
Shines wanly, or on striped apple and smooth pear
Flits blushing; now on rug or carpet spread
In view of the merry buyers, the rude dyes
Re-crimsons, or an antic shadow throws
Over the chestnuts brazier's glowing eyes;
And now the sleeping head
Of a gypsy child in his dim corner shows,
Huddled against a canvas wall, his bed
An ancient sack; nor torch, nor hundred cries
Awake him from his sweet, profound repose.[24]

London was now thoroughly established as a subject. In the work of Baudelaire, Whistler and the Impressionists, Wilde and his friends, English poets could see that the city was not to be left to journalists and social reformers but that it offered considerable aesthetic possibilities. Arthur Symons explored its subtler possibilities and John Davidson came to argue for a wider range than that admitted by most of his contemporaries.

Notes to Chapter Six

1. Buchanan's poems were described in these terms by a contemporary reviewer, quoted in A. Stodart-Walker, Robert Buchanan - The Poet of Modern Revolt, (London, 1901), p. 47.
2. See Colin MacInnes, Sweet Saturday Night, (London, 1967).
3. Quoted in MacInnes, op. cit.
4. Richard Le Gallienne, The Romantic 'Nineties, (London, 1926), p. 47.
5. Lionel Johnson, Complete Poems, edited by Ian Fletcher, (London, 1953).
6. Gustave Dore and Blanchard Jerrold, London a Pilgrimage, (London, 1872).
7. Robert Buchanan, The City of Dream, (London, 1888).
8. Holbrook Jackson, op. cit., p. 110.
9. Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, translated by Jonathan Mayne, (London, 1964).
10. Arthur Symons, 'On Behalf of Patchouli', Silhouettes, (1892).
11. James Abbot McNeill Whistler, 'The Ten O'Clock', The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, (London, 1892).
12. Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', Poems and Essays, (1956).
13. Quoted in Linda Nochlin, Realism, p. 158.
14. Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Illuminations, p. 199.
15. Baudelaire, 'Crowds', Poems in Prose, translated by A. Symons, (London, 1905).
16. T. S. Eliot, 'What Dante Means to Me', To Criticize the Critic, (London, 1965).
17. Charles Baudelaire, Baudelaire (Poems), edited by Francis Scarfe, (London, 1964).

18. Oscar Wilde, The Poems of Oscar Wilde, edited by Robert Ross, (London, 1969).
19. Richard Le Gallienne, Nightingales, (London, 1893).
20. Lord Alfred Douglas, Collected Poems, (London, 1919).
21. Richard Le Gallienne, The Romantic 'Nineties, p. 122.
22. Stephen Philips, Poems, (London, 1898).
23. Laurence Binyon, First Book of London Visions, (London, 1895).
24. ibid.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ARTHUR SYMONS

The poetry of Arthur Symons is essentially that of urban man. It is not only that he makes the city itself one of his main subjects - both Silhouettes (1892) and London Nights (1895) are full of poems about streets, the embankments and the city's inhabitants - but that almost every subject he ever touches is influenced by his city existence. If he writes of the country it is usually with reference to the town. His love-poetry is about relationships which derive both their appeal and their inadequacy from the fact that they are set in the city. His entertainments are those of urban man - the music-hall and theatre - the books or paintings he enjoys are those which are themselves products of the city. His language reflects it: his images are of the town, his diction is frequently urbane and sophisticated.

Symons has described himself when first he lived in London as a young man, practising, what he called 'the religion of the eyes'. 'This search without an aim grew to be almost a torture to me; my eyes ached with the effort, but I could not control them.'[1] He was also an eager collector of 'impressions and sensations'.[2] In fact this adaptation from Pater's 'ideas and sensations' reflects a shift towards the visual and concrete which characterises all his work. His choice of 'impressions', and his obvious and acknowledged debts to French painters, especially Degas, can clearly be seen in his choice of subject-matter - smoky scenes, street-lights, stage-doors, dancers etc. But his belief in the importance of concrete images from the world around derived also from his discussions with

Yeats on the meaning and importance of Symbolism. Yeats tells us that he had read Hallam's review of the early poems of Tennyson[3] in which Hallam praised Shelley and Keats because they 'lived in a world of images', and because he believed:

> This powerful tendency of imagination to a life of immediate sympathy with the external universe is not nearly so liable to false views of art as the opposite disposition of purely intellectual contemplation.[4]

A similar idea is expressed by Symons who had derived it from his reading of those very French Symbolist poets influenced by the English Romantics:

> The whole visible world itself, we are told, is but a symbol, made visible in order that we may apprehend ourselves, and not be blown hither and thither like a flame in the night.[5]

Symons brought this faith in images from the world about him to his apprehension of the city. As a result we are given impressions of those scenes he was able to contemplate with a freshness and clarity which comes of the conviction that what is observed is of value.[6]

> The river shook with wavering gleams,
> That softly plunged through depths that lay
> Impenetrable as the grave of day,
> As near and far away as dreams.
> A bright train flashed with all its squares
> Of warm light where the bridge lay mistily,
> The night was all about us: we were free,
> Free of the day and all its cares!
>
> (from 'Nocturne', 1889) Vol I, p.148

> Miraculous silver-work in stone
> Against the blue miraculous skies,
> The belfr y towers and turrets rise
> Out of the arches that enthrone
> That airy wonder of the skies.
>
> (from 'At Burgos', 1891) Vol. I p. 157

The dim wet pavement lit irregularly
With shimmering streaks of gaslight, faint and frayed,
Shone luminous green where sheets of glass displayed
Long breadths of faded blinds mechanically.

(from 'A Winter Night', 1886) Vol. I p.8

I said 'those scenes which he was able to contemplate' because Symons no less than any of his predecessors was subject to the difficulties presented by the crowded daytime streets. The poetry which shows most clearly his ability to look at the city is usually set at night or indoors. He would have shared the common inability to confront such disturbing sights as the daylight revealed - the confusion, poverty, crowds - but in addition he needed an illusory world for his love-affairs. The horrors daylight might bring in this context are set out in the poem, 'In Bohemia' (1892):

Drawn blinds and flaring gas within,
And wine, and women, and cigars;
Without, the city's heedless din;
Above, the white unheeding stars.

And we, alike from each remote,
The world that works, the heaven that waits,
Con our brief pleasures o'er by rote,
The favourite pastimes of the Fates.

We smoke, to fancy that we dream,
And drink, a moment's joy to prove,
And fain would love, and only seem
To live because we cannot love.

Draw back the blinds, put out the light!
'Tis morning, let the daylight come.
God! how the women's cheeks are white,
And how the sunlight strikes us dumb! Vol. I, p. 115.

On another occasion he talks of 'these flaring London nights, / Where midnight withers into morn' ('In the Meadows at Mantua', 1894). Although many poets had viewed the city in daylight with as much

discomfort as Symons, he was one of the first to actually write about this very situation.

The atmosphere of the city is conveyed in the very pace of Symons's work. There is a sense of immediacy, sometimes even of urgency as one impression follows another. Two poems 'City Nights' from the volume Silhouettes (1892) set out to create this sense of the city's movement and vitality. The first, 'In the Train', evokes a succession of objects unconnected except by the movement of the train. It seems at first like a perfect 'Impressionist' poem with its chain of fragmented images and strong sense of immediacy. But much of its success depends on the fact that Symons has vitalised the imagery with human metaphors, 'the flashing eyes of the streets', or 'Scaring the life of the streets', and has brought a human reaction in to convey the full impact of the moment in the final three lines:

> The train through the night of the town,
> Through a blackness broken in twain
> By the sudden finger of streets;
> Lights, red, yellow, and brown,
> From curtain and window-pane,
> The flashing eyes of the streets.
>
> Night, and the rush of the train,
> A cloud of smoke through the town,
> Scaring the life of the streets;
> And the leap of the heart again,
> Out into the night, and down
> The dazzling vista of streets! Vol. I, p. 152.

We shall note in Symons's poetry in general a very close, unobtrusive interpenetration of imagery and human emotion.

In the companion poem 'In the Temple' (1891) we are again made aware of the city's movement, but this time it is in the background, and the Temple garden provides an image of timeless peace in

contrast with it. In this poem as in the last, we are aware of the clarity of Symons's imagery, even when what he wishes to convey may be swift and fragmentary. He is concerned to present the thing as he sees it, not as a means of providing exercises in style as sometimes seemed the case with Wilde or Le Gallienne. Where their language was thickly encrusted with metaphor his is comparatively plain and single-dimensional. He has recognised that an adjustment has to be made when translating the principles of Impressionism into poetry, and I think the main lesson he has learned, almost certainly from Yeats and the French symbolists, has been to allow language to retain its emotional, associative values.

> The grey and misty night,
> Slim trees that hold the night among
> Their branches, and, along
> The vague embankment, light on light.
>
> The sudden, racing lights!
> I can just hear, distinct, aloof,
> The gaily clattering hoof
> Beating the rhythm of festive nights.
>
> The gardens to the weeping moon
> Sigh back the breath of tears.
> O the refrain of years on years
> 'Neath the weeping moon! Vol. I, p. 153.

Symons's love-poetry in the city is full of tense, highly strung emotion. His most notorious poem with the reviewers, which earned him their rebukes was 'Stella Maris'. Its opening lines do suggest an emotional life consisting entirely of a series of random encounters:

> Why is it I remember yet
> You, of all women one has met,
> In random wayfare, as one meets
> The chance romances of the streets,
> The [illegible] of a night?

Frequently he uses the city background to enhance his excitement, to provide an atmosphere in which the woman blossoms. A typical example from London Nights is 'At the Stage-Door'. Here he plays up the more troubling and disorientating possibilities of the city scene at night in order that his own girl's beauty may shine out more clearly. In the lines describing the background as it seems before she appears we have evidence of the fact that as well as admiring Baudelaire as a young man, Symons was also a great reader of James Thomson.

> Kicking my heels in the street,
> Here at the edge of the pavement I wait for you, sweet,
> Here in the crowd, the blent noises, blurred lights, of
> the street.
>
> Under the archway sheer,
> Sudden and black as a hole in the placarded wall,
> Faces flicker and veer,
> Wavering out of the darkness into the light,
> Wavering back into night;
> Under the archway, suddenly seen, the curls
> And thin, bright faces of girls,
> Roving eyes and smiling lips, and the glance
> Seeking, finding perchance,
> Here at the edge of the pavement, there by the wall,
> One face, out of them all.
>
> Steadily, face after face,
> Cheeks with the blush of the paint yet lingering, eyes
> Still with their circle of black ...
> But hers, but hers? Vol. I, p.182.

Symons has not only drawn on the dramatic possibilities the city landscape offers to express a heightened consciousness - such as the sharp contrasts, the disconcerting blurring of lights and colours, he has also taken up the device of depriving certain figures of personality by turning them into mere faces ('Steadily,

face after face') or fragmented parts of the face, such as the curls and the blackened eyes. When the looked-for face appears, it is with 'Roseleaf cheeks, and flower-soft lips, and the grace / Of the vanishing Spring come back'. Although he seems to make the city his element, he nevertheless uses natural imagery at this point to isolate the beauty of the woman he values.

So many of Symons's love affairs took place in the city that its sights inevitably provided his emotional vocabulary. We see the process of this taking place in Sonnet XI (dated 1895) from 'Amoris Victima'. Here the streets of London are not only used to show how they force him to remember, but his choice of vocabulary also conveys something of the character of their relationship:

> I have endured a week's oblivion
> Of foreign faces, I have seen the dawn
> Blush through veiled windows, and not vainly sought
> Refuge from your intolerable thought.
> Now, as I tread these London streets again,
> There grows up softly, from the night and rain,
> The same old ghostly haunting of your eyes;
> And the old poisonous mist of memories
> Rises about me, and the old desire
> Quickens along my veins in sharper fire.
> O! I am lost, you will not set me free,
> Unless I turn again, and seek the sea,
> Some vague new world of waters, bounded by
> The soft and sudden barrier of the sky. Vol. I, p. 279.

Here the city has provided a landscape appropriate to a love which is insidiously tenacious. Sometimes he seems to be ransacking every corner of the city to find scenes and objects appropriate to his changing moods. And yet he is able to suggest that it is as much the power of the object itself to create the mood, so that we are given a strong sense of the total emotional picture, the urban scene

and the poet's response. 'The Barrel-Organ' (1895) shows total fusion of object and feeling; in technique as well as in the instrument itself these may have influenced Eliot's lines in 'Portrait of a Lady'.

> Enigmatical, tremulous,
> Voice of the troubled wires,
> What remembering desires
> Wail to me, wandering thus
> Up through the night with a cry,
> Inarticulate, insane.
> Out of the night of the street and the rain
> Into the rain and the night of the sky?
>
> Inarticulate, voice of my heart,
> Rusty, a worn-out thing,
> Harsh with a broken string,
> Mended, and pulled apart,
> All the old tunes played through,
> Fretted by hands that have played,
> Tremulous voice that cries to me out of the shade,
> The voice of my heart is crying in you. Vol. I, p. 305

On another occasion, picking up a hint from Verlaine and Rimbaud, he has the streets reflect a mood of melancholy boredom. Verlaine had quoted Rimbaud's 'Il pleut doucement sur la ville', and began his poem with the lines,

> Il pleure dans mon coeur
> Comme il pleut sur la ville.
>
> (from Romances sans paroles, 1874)

Symons has translated the rain and the streets but adopts a less elegiac, more urbane tone:

> The dull persistence of the rain,
> Long melancholy streets, the vain
> Desire, the hopeless wandering;
> Here every woman has a face
> Inexorably commonplace,
> Ennui is over everything.
>
> ('Bordeaux'. 1891) LW 3 p. 279

Symons's delight in the world of the theatre was, as he himself explains, an essential part of his enthusiasm for the city. He describes its importance in the part of London - A Book of Aspects (1909) where he talks also of his own artistic ambitions in presenting London in verse:

> All commerce and all industries have their share in taking us further from nature and further from our needs, as they create about us unnatural conditions which are really what develop in use these new, extravagant, really needless needs. And the whole night-world of the stage is, in its way a part of the very soul of cities. That lighted gulf, before which the footlights are the flaming stars between world and world, show the city the passions and that beauty which the soul of man in cities is occupied in weeding out of its own fruitful and prepared soil.
>
> ...
>
> The ballet seemed to me the subtlest of the visible arts, and dancing a more significant speech than words.
>
> ...
>
> The ballet in particular, but also the whole surprising life of the music-halls took hold of me with the charm of what was least real among the pompous and distressing unrealities of a great city.

The world afforded him by the theatre was the epitome of the main escape route for the Bohemian poet. In this poem he gains a 'decadent' effect partly from the note of blasphemy - this 'miracle' is set above that of the churches; but the contrast is also simply with the dreary daytime world of London:

> Impression
> To M.C.
>
> The pink and black of silk and lace,
> Flushed in the rosy-golden glow
> Of lamplight on her lifted face;
> Powder and wig, and pink and lace,

And those pathetic eyes of hers;
But all the London footlights know
The little plaintive smile that stirs
The shadow in those eyes of hers.

Outside, the dreary church-bell tolled,
The London Sunday faded slow;
Ah, what is this? what wings unfold
In this miraculous rose of gold?

(1894)

In a set of poems dedicated to the memory of Charles Baudelaire, is one describing the art of a dancer, Nini Patte-en-l'air. I quote the first stanza and the last two, which are enough to show Symons's presentation of the complexity of responses elicited by this dancer, and the very sophisticated, urbane language he employs to do so:

The gold Casino's Spring parterre
Flowers with the Spring, this golden week;
Gladys, Toloche, Valtesse, are there;
But all eyes turn as one to seek
The drawers of Nini Patte-en-l'air.
...
What exquisite indecency,
Select, supreme, severe, an art!
The art of knowing how to be
Part lewd, aesthetical in part,
And <u>fin-de-siècle</u> essentially.

The Maenad of the Decadence,
Collectedly extravagant,
Her learned fury wakes the sense
That, fainting, needs for excitant
This science of concupiscence.

(1892) Vol. 3, pp. 196-7.

This particular note of urbanity derives partly from the air of ironical detachment characteristic of many of the <u>fin de siècle</u> poets. Symons knew Baudelaire's writings on the dandy (much of it

in the essay on Constantin Guys) in which he describes the sophisticated, leisured stroller through the city streets whose gifts of independence and detachment make him particularly suited to be the artist of the city. In his essay on Henley, Symons talks of the advantages of being in some way a Bohemian, a conscious outsider:

> Of the men who rhyme, so large a number are cursed with suburban comforts. A villa and books never made a poet; they do but tend to the building up of the respectable virtues; and for the respectable virtues poetry has but the slightest use. To roam in the sun and air with vagabonds, to haunt the strange corners of cities, to know all the useless, and improper, and amusing people who are alone worth knowing; to live, as well as to observe life; or to be shut up in hospital, drawn out of the rapid current of life into a sordid and exasperating inaction - to wait, for a time in the ante-room of death: it is such things as these that make for poetry.[67]

Henley's position as an 'outsider' was the result of circumstances; Symons pays tribute to his use of this role when in the same review he describes his work as showing 'a manly Bohemianism'. But in the case of many of the poets of the 'nineties it was an assumed pose. Wilde and his friends, as the period's mythology has told us, cultivated the possibilities of dandyism, not only in dress and behaviour, but in their witty, detached language. To the poet, this pose offers the psychological and artistic advantage of detachment - it serves a similar function to that of the balcony viewpoint already observed in several of the French Impressionists. Once again a feature of city life which had sometimes troubled poets in the past - in this case the sense of estrangement - is being turned to advantage.

Although Symons adopts the language afforded by this role, he is unable to assume its particular standpoint for long. It demanded a degree of equilibriums which he found it difficult to sustain for he was usually too caught up in the emotions of city life. Rather than reflecting the poise of a Baudelairean 'flâneur' his work more often indicates anxiety and conflict. For however much he may seem to make the city his element, revelling as we have seen in its visual and emotional possibilities, he is always aware of the background presence of the Great Debate. His arguments 'On behalf of Patchouli', quoted in the last chapter, are as with an invisible opponent who thinks the natural world the only proper setting for poetry. In the tone of many of his poems there is a slight sense of strain as if he were illustrating his stance in an argument. A little word here and there may give him away, as for example in the poem 'April Midnight' (1892) in which he and his girl are described happily 'roaming together under the gaslight' and he exclaims that it is good to be roaming 'Even in London, even at midnight', as though love's more appropriate setting is elsewhere. We saw the same attitude slipping through in the meeting at the stage-door, when the girl is described in the imagery of natural flowers.

Symons's work in fact shows a constant vacillation between a compulsive craving for the streets and the desire to breathe freely the air of sea or meadows. Later, in the early years of the twentieth century he wrote a series explicitly entitled 'Amends to Nature' many of which are set in Cornwall, but as early as 1896, he had written a poem pitying the trees of Paris because they have no knowledge of country sunlight:

> All that they see, instead of flocks and herds,
> And happy flights of birds,

Is the long, dull mechanic flow of feet
Through lengths of jostling street;
The wheels that turn behind the patient horse
Upon his weary course;
And all the human faces dull and base,
Face after tedious face.

This is the fate of trees that know the light
Of Paris gas by night. Vol. 2, p. 339

It may be that there is a parallel between his constant need to assert the validity of urban subject-matter and his over-protested enthusiasm for prostitutes and dancing-girls. When such relationships go sour on him he uses the same images of disease that he also uses to describe the city when he is disenchanted with it. This poem 'London' written in 1904 uses similar terminology to Le Gallienne's 'A Ballad of London' but from a totally disillusioned point of view. Now the natural world provides the perspective:

The sun, a fiery orange in the air,
Things and discolours to a disc of tin,
Until the breathing mist's mouth sucks it in;
And now there is no colour anywhere,
Only the ghost of greyness; vapour fills
The hollows of the streets, and seems to shroud
Gulfs where a noise of multitude is loud
As unseen water falling among hills.
Now the light withers, stricken at the root,
And, in the evil glimpses of the light,
Men as trees walking loom through lanes of night,
Hung from the globes of some unnatural fruit.
To live, and to die daily, deaths like these,
Is it to live, while there are winds and seas? Vol 2, p. 199

In the later love-poetry, similar imagery is used to express distaste, almost disgust.

Symons was too interested in the effects of the city on the human psyche to embrace it unquestioningly. In the poem 'Towns'

(1903), he asks, 'What is this thing the towns have made, / Into their likeness made anew?', and in ~~a letter written in 1896~~ Cities (1903) he ~~had~~ complained of the way living in London influenced his attitude to his work:

> In London I am too close to a multitude of interesting trifles, of attractive people; of opportunities for the satisfaction of every desire. To will and to receive are, in London, simultaneous. ... There are too many people, too many books, too many museums, too many theatres; the spectacle of this feverish, unslackening life is too absorbing. I cannot escape the newspapers; for even if I do not read them, there is always somebody to tell me what they have been saying of my own or my friend's last book. I cannot help sometimes asking myself what will be the immediate, urban effect of something which I have written; and it is a little humiliating to find ~~oneself~~ one's-self in so trivial a mental attitude which it would be difficult to preserve in front of the Pantheon or of the Coliseum. And above all, I have not time to live. Life scatters into waves all over the rocks, falling back broken and dispersed into the seething troubles of the ocean. Yesterday is today and today tomorrow, before I have been alone with myself for an hour. That canopy of smoke which London has set up between itself and the sky imprisons me, day by day, with the debris of each day, I forget that anything else exists ...'[8]

He is lamenting the quick succession of stimuli, the reduction of his own work to a commodity similar to the kind of things being thrust at him in the urban environment. His dissatisfaction with the city becomes very marked in his more 'public' writing after the turn of the century, and much of London - A Book of Aspects deplores the mechanising effects of contemporary London and looks back with some nostalgia to the time when Lamb, whom he quotes, could talk of

'the sweet security of streets'. But the refusal to be completely absorbed by London was constant, even when Symons seemed most an enthusiast, and the effect has been to give his verse an awareness in its subject-matter and its possible inadequacies. For this reason he is very consciously a city-poet for the material is never entirely taken for granted.

Symons's fluctuating response to the city and his desire always to relate closely to his material are, of course, connected. Had he maintained a more detached pose his attitude would undoubtedly have been more consistent, but in his wish to see clearly he is experiencing all the problems and conflicts faced by city poets before him. Unlike Wordsworth or Buchanan, however, he had many more means available to him of mediating the material. He had read both Baudelaire and James Thomson and admired the paintings of the French Impressionists, particularly Degas. In tracing the development of his style we find evidence of all these influences. Yeats once said of Symons that he, more than any other man he knew, could 'slip as it were into the mind of another' and he is probably, after George Moore, the most imitative writer of this period. But because most of the artists he imitates are foreign or working in another medium, we never quite lose the characteristic Symons style - the sense of conscious engagement with material which might at any moment prove too intransigent to handle.

The city pieces in his earliest volume Days and Nights (1889) show that he had probably read Hood (whose poems with Doré's illustrations went into four printings in the 1870s) and, possibly, Buchanan. 'The Abandoned' and 'The Street Singer' describe in fairly conventional, sometimes clichéd language the plight of a

female suicide and a poverty-stricken singer. Elsewhere in the volume we see the influence of James Thomson, and perhaps Doré's engravings in the presentation of miserably isolated figures against a background of contrasted light and shadow. Only one poem 'Episode of a Night of May' stands out from the rest in its note of irony, possibly picked up from Laforgue, but expressive of the whole fashion for French culture at that time:

> The coloured lanterns lit the trees, the grass,
> The little tables underneath the trees,
> And the rays dappled like a delicate breeze
> Each wine-illumined glass.
> ...
> But she yawned prettily. 'Come then,' said he.
> He found a chair, Veuve Cliquot, some cigars.
> They emptied glasses and admired the stars,
> The lanterns, night, the sea.
>
> Nature, the newest opera, the dog
> (So clever) who could shoulder arms and dance;
> He mentioned Alphone Daudet's last romance,
> Last Sunday's river-fog,
>
> Love, Immortality; the talk ran down
> To these mere lees: they wearied each of each,
> And tortured ennui into hollow speech,
> And yawned, to hide a frown.

(from 'Episode of a Night of May,' 1888)
Vol. 1, pp. 56-7.

In Silhouettes we find him picking out individuals from the city crowd, usually the poor or workers, very much in the manner of the French Realists who had depicted the city's working life in a new way. Examples are 'The Blind Beggar', 'The Old Labourer' and 'The Absinthe Drinker'. In this volume the influence of painting seems most marked and there is less emotional engagement than was developed later, more a presentation of things as seen. In London Nights all is colour, movement, bright lights, make-up. The spirit

of Baudelaire and of the French Impressionists seem to have merged into one, to produce a series of brief, vivid night-scenes, frequently interiors, as for example 'Pastel: Masks and Faces' (1890):

> The light of our cigarettes
> Went and came in the gloom:
> It was dark in the little room.
>
> Dark, and then, in the dark,
> Sudden, a flash, a glow,
> And a hand and a ring I know.
>
> And then, through the dark, a flush
> Ruddy and vague, the grace
> (A rose!) of her lyric face. Vol. 1, p. 104.

An expression like 'lyric face' is very common in Symons's verse at this period, when, like many of his contemporaries he reflected the merging of different media in an extensive use of synaesthesia. He writes of 'a voice of violets' or evokes midnight in Paris as follows:

> Midnight falls across hollow gulfs of night
> As a stone that falls in a sounding well;
> Under us the Seine flows through dark and light,
> While the beat of time (hark!) is audible
>
> ('On the Bridge', 1890) Vol. 1, p 142.

In the early years of the twentieth century Symons was re-reading Baudelaire and translating the poems in prose into English. His own poem 'The Old Women' (1906) very clearly reflects this influence and owes a great deal to 'Les Petites vieilles'. It also marks a transition in Symons's style. These lines serve as an example:

> Sometimes when the swift gaslight wakes
> The dreams and fever of the sleepless town,
> A shaking huddled thing in a black gown
> Will steal at midnight, carrying with her

Violet little bags of lavender,
Into the tap-room full of noisy light. Vol 2, p. 47.

'Noisy light' is the kind of synaesthetic phrase characteristic of Symons's work from the early to late 'nineties, but the 'dreams and fever of the sleepless town' is more indicative of his later attitudes. As his approach to the city becomes more and more disenchanted, even jaundiced, so his language takes up the vocabulary of disease and malignancy. It is really only after the turn of the century that his terminology becomes 'decadent' in the way that Le Gallienne's or Lord Alfred Douglas's had been during the 'nineties. For in his own 'nineties volumes, however vacillating in his approach to the city, his language shows a healthy exuberance and clarity. But in the later period we have the imagery of the unnatural where the unnatural means, not delightfully artificial, but unhealthily perverted. The poem, 'London', quoted above is typical with its 'disc of tin', 'breathing mists', stricken light that 'withers at the root' and lamps like 'globes of unnatural fruit'. It is as if Symons is commenting as much on the taste for London as he is on the city itself. It is perhaps worth noting that he never did identify himself with the Wilde circle, considering Wilde himself 'a flighty-brained enthusiast and poseur'.

As I have suggested above, Symons's retreat from the city co-incided with a distaste for the kind of relationships it had afforded him. The connection is powerfully made in a poem written in 1900, Part VII of 'An Epilogue to Love'. It begins with a striking metaphor:

Your eyes are empty streets where men have passed.
I search in vain: there is no shadow cast
Upon their silence; yet a stealthy thing
Lurks in my heart watching and listening.

What do I seek? what is there I should find?
Only a little dust upon the wind,
Where many feet have trodden ... Vol. 2, p. 251

This metaphor seems to be the epitome of Symons's ability to interweave the imagery of the city with his emotional life, sometimes reflecting harmony, but often rejection, irritation, the need to escape. It marks an important stage in the development of urban poetry, the point at which the city becomes a metaphor so appropriate to a phase of human feeling that no other can be imagined; there is a total integration of idea and image.

ɔtes to Chapter Seven

. Arthur Symons, 'A Prelude to Life', Spiritual Adventures, The ɔllected Works of Arthur Symons, (London, 1924), Vol.5, p.32.

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. All quotations from Symons's poems are taken from The Collected Vorks of Arthur Symons, (London 1924).

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. Arthur Symons, Cities, (London 1903) pp. 56-7.

CHAPTER EIGHT

W. E. HENLEY AND JOHN DAVIDSON

Arthur Symons characterised the special 'note' of W. E. Henley as one of 'manly Bohemianism', a phrase which he might equally well have used of John Davidson. Common to both writers is a strain of tough realism, together with the experimental freedom of the social outsider. Both had close but uneasy relations with the 'aesthetic' writers of the fin de siècle, both attempted to confront urban material and present it directly in a way unknown to most of their contemporaries.

Henley's aestheticism was the Anglo-Saxon answer to foreign importations. He entirely understood the aims of contemporary French writers, admiring them for their restraint and purity of form, but at the same time he considered Dickens, with his conscious craftsmanship, equally worthy of aesthetic consideration:

> and if all his life he never ceased from self-education but went unswervingly in pursuit of culture, it was out of love for his art and because his conscience as an artist would not let him do otherwise.[1]

In painting he argued for what Pound was later to describe as the 'primary pigment', an art of form and colour, rather than of narrative or of photographic mimesis. He condemned the Pre-Raphaelites for being too literary and said they were fighting a losing battle against the camera. In an essay published in 1902 in the second series of Views and Reviews he praised Delacroix, because 'if he did nothing else, he thought in pictures', and was an enthusiastic defender of Whistler to whom he dedicated one of his city poems. When he was editing the National Observer he annoyed a contributor by inserting into his article an anti-Wagner remark for no other reason than to

improve the balance and rhythm of the sentence, and his first volume was praised by Wilde for its aestheticisms. Wilde and Henley became arguing acquaintances, and Wilde once said that Henley had been the only man ever to tax to the full his intellect and ingenuity.[2]

The differences in opinion between Henley and Wilde point to some of the contradictions in the intellectual life of the late nineteenth century, contradictions which had close connections with the development of urban poetry. Both Henley and Wilde were initially 'outsiders' as far as the English upper-classes were concerned. Wilde adopted some of their manners and cultivated an aristocratic pose to the point of caricature while becoming increasingly opposed to their fundamental beliefs; Henley remained an outsider in manner but accepted and even preached their ideology. Wilde was artistically and politically 'progressive', aligning himself with the avant-garde in aesthetics and advocating a curious, idiosyncratic socialism. And yet much of his art, particularly that dealing with the most 'democratic' and modern subject - the city is restrictive in outlook and exclusive in appeal and carried to its extremes would deprive the masses of any means to voice their aspirations. Henley on the other hand was a Tory and an Imperialist politically but the aim of his urban poetry is largely to create atmosphere and to communicate a sense of place in a manner which he himself saw as Whistlerian. At the same time his means of expression and range of material was broadly populist. In his best poetry, as we shall see, there is a flexibility of vocabulary and form which allows for the inclusion of material quite outside the range of Wilde or Le Gallienne. In an article on Hood he shows an awareness of the social developments which made for the success of 'The Song of the Shirt':

> All was made ready against his coming - the age, the subject, the public mind, the public capacity of emotion; and in The Song of the Shirt he approved himself a great singer. In the days of Lycus the Centaur and the Midsummer Fairies he could no more have written it than the public could have heeded had he written. But times were changed - Dickens had come and the humanitarian epoch - and the great song went like fire.[3]

And yet, Henley himself, writing in another great 'humanitarian epoch' could align himself politically with some of the most reactionary thinking.

The confusion of perspective on the part of educated literary people was greater than in any other progressive era for now the forces for change were proving to be those whose language and culture was alien and whose power was therefore doubly threatening. We have already noted how in both James Thomson and the fin de siècle writers a sense of isolation or some degree of distance from the surroundings seems necessary to deal with urban material. And in both kinds of poetry, the 'sublime' and the 'aesthetic', much of the success comes from a transformation of the material. The world around, when that world is the city, has had to be expressed at one remove, and the essential links established by Wordsworth and others in the Romantic era between man and his environment have been broken. I think the choice of the city as a subject did much to help perpetuate the poets' sense of removal from what Yeats called 'the general purposes of life', a feeling which seems to be one of the strongest factors in the early poetry of T. S. Eliot, and one which makes him particularly well equipped to write urban poetry.

If Henley had little sympathy with the collective aspirations of the urban crowds, the city as landscape had nevertheless a strong

appeal for him. After a painful and emotionally disorientating stay in hospital, to which Symons ascribed his ability to experience life as an outsider, his first sensations of freedom were associated with a city, in this case Edinburgh. We might compare his ecstatic response here to that of Lamb almost a century earlier, with the difference that Henley communicates his feeling by a stress on the objects seen, rather than by describing the emotion itself:

> Carry me out
> Into the wind and the sunshine,
> Into the beautiful world.
>
> O, the wonder, the spell of the streets!
> The stature and strength of the horses,
> The rustle and echo of footfalls,
> The flat roar and ~~echo~~ rattle of wheels!
> A swift tram floats huge on us ...
> It's a dream?
> The smell of the mud in my nostrils
> Blows brave - like a breath of the sea!
>
> As of old,
> Ambulant, undulant drapery
> Vaguely and strangely provocative,
> Flutters and beckons. O, yonder -
> Is it? - the gleam of a stocking!
> Sudden, a spire
> Wedged in the mist! O, the houses,
> The long lines of lofty, gray houses,
> Cross-hatched with shadow and light!
> These are the streets. ...
> Each is an avenue leading
> Whither I will!
>
> Free ...!
> Dizzy, hysterical, faint,
> I sit, and the carriage rolls on with me
> Into the wonderful world.

It was perhaps because of this experience that Henley was one of the few poets prepared to dwell on the city per se, and almost the only one at this period who saw it as a Celestial City. One of the poems in 'London Voluntaries' (1890-1892) with the prefix 'Scherzando' amounts to a rare hymn in praise of the city. London is seen in daylight, but a golden October light which works its alchemy on the scene. To gain the full impact, of course, the roar of the crowd must be muted, and significantly enough Henley evokes Tennyson's 'The Lotos Eaters' to suggest the escape from it:

> And even the roar
> Of the strong streams of toil, that pause and pour
> Eastward and westward, sounds suffused -
> Seems as it were bemused
> And blurred, and like the speech
> Of lazy seas on a lotus-haunted beach -
> With this enchanted lustrousness,
> This mellow magic ...

He describes the towers and spires of churches, St Clement's and St Bride's, with St Paul's culminating the passage:

> And the high majesty of Paul's
> Uplifts a voice of living light, and calls -
> Calls to his millions to behold and see
> How goodly this his London Town can be!

He can hymn the city in this light because its dreary and distressing aspects are transfigured. In this case the blind man among the gypsies selling flowers is made equal with shopwindows, roofs and spires:

> The dingy dreariness of the picture-place,
> Turned very nearly bright,
> Takes on a luminous transiency of grace,
> And shows no more a scandal to the ground.
> The very blind man pottering on the kerb,
> Among the posies and the ostrich feathers

And the rude voices touched with all the weathers
Of the long, varying year,
Shares in the universal alms of light,
The windows with their fleeting, flickering fires,
The height and spread of frontage shining sheer,
The quiring signs, the rejoicing roofs and spires -
'Tis El Dorado - El Dorado plain,
The Golden City!

There is in most of the 'London Voluntaries' a stronger syntactical structure than in most of the fin de siècle urban poets. This is used to build up the objects described and also has the effect of instilling confidence in the reader, so that the city of Henley seems very substantial compared with that of many other writers of this period. He uses synaesthesia in the lines quoted above but it is so muted as not to distract or draw attention away from the object.

The most metaphorical of the five poems making up the 'Voluntaries' follows the 'Scherzando', and describes - Largo e mesto - the 'Wind-Fiend' which brings death from consumption. It is here that Henley's London becomes an Inferno, even to the river being described like that of the Underworld. Henley disliked Thomson's The City of Dreadful Night, because he deplored its philosophy, but here, consciously or otherwise he has created a similar world. There is the same kind of imagery and the same use of abstracts to the point of allegory:

The afflicted City, prone from mark to mark
In shameful occultation, seems
A nightmare labyrinthine, dim and drifting,
With wavering gulfs and antic heights, and shifting,
Rent in the stuff of a material dark,
Wherein the lamplight, scattered and sick and pale,
Shows like the leper's living blotch of bale:

Uncoiling monstrous into street on street
Paven with perils, teeming with mischance,
Where man and beast go blindfold and in dread ...

If this seems like the height of Thomsonesque transformation, the lines which follow shortly after show one sense in which Henley was a realist: there is no romanticism in his treatment of the prostitute:

That make ...
... the poor, loitering harlot rather choose
Go pinched and pined to bed
Than lurk and shiver and curse her wretched way
From arch to arch, scouting some threepenny prey.

There is a similar de-romanticising in the final lines, when a Rhymers' Club milieu has to be abandoned for the suburban lodging. At the same time we find realism in the use of language: Death is described in the terms a prose-writer might use for a member of the petit-bourgeoisie in a naturalistic novel, and the activity of the Wind-Fiend in the final line is expressed in the vocabulary of the street:

And Death the while -
Death with his well-worn, lean, professional smile,
Death in his threadbare working trim -
Comes to your bedside, unannounced and bland,
And with expert, inevitable hand
Feels at your windpipe, fingers you in the lung,
Or flicks the clot well into the labouring heart:
Thus signifying unto old and young,
However hard of mouth or wild of whim,
'Tis time - 'tis time by his ancient watch - to part
From books and women and talk and drink and art.
And you go humbly after him
To a mean suburban lodging: on the way
To what or where
Not death, who is old and very wise, can say:

And you - how should you care
So long as, unreclaimed of hell,
The Wind-Fiend, the insufferable,
Thus vicious and thus patient, sits him down
To the black job of burking London Town?

It was probably to lines such as these that Symons was alluding when he contrasted Henley with the 'bourgeois solemnity' of much contemporary verse and preferred him because he was 'casual'.[4]

Henley had other London projects besides the 'London Voluntaries' and a few other city poems scattered here and there: he edited an anthology of London poetry through the centuries, A London Garland (1895) in which he included his own poem to James McNeill Whistler, now called 'Nocturn' and illustrated with one of Whistler's own Nocturnes. This is more emphatically a mood-poem than the 'London Voluntaries' in that it explores variations on emotions and ideas rather than focussing on the urban landscape to any great degree. Henley also collaborated with the artist William Nicholson to produce a lavish volume called London Types (1898).

London Types descends from the school of the Smith brothers and Locker-Lampson, providing picturesque individuals from the urban mass to interest the more leisured moments of the middle-classes. Nicholson's hand-coloured woodblocks seem to have come first and Henley 'illustrates' his prints. Although music-hall culture had made East End characters accessible to some of the middle-classes and broadened the view given by the writers of fiction, these particular 'types' are set in the world inhabited by the bourgeoisie. The Bus-driver is in the Knightsbridge road, the Hawker in Kensington, the Coster in Hammersmith, There is a Lady on Rotten Row and a Bluecoat Boy in Newgate street. With the exception of the description of the Sandwich-man who is a down-at-heel drunk, and

the Hawker whose Cheapside background is described, these are light-hearted sketches very much in the popular, Locker-Lampson manner. Like Lionel Johnson and other poets who took up that particular strain, Henley also shows his taste for the Augustan manner. But he was an admirer of Fielding rather than of the 'polite' Augustans, and we also find in London Types a realism in the satire which recalls some of Pope's Dunciad. Of the Hawker's wares he writes, 'The careful City marvels at and buys / For nurselings in the suburbs to despise', and he is prompted by the Lady in the Row to observe:

> So this fair creature, pictured in The Row,
> As one of that gay, adulterous world; whose round
> Is by the Serpentine, as well would show,
> And might, I deem, as readily be found
> On Streatham's Hill, or Wimbledon's, or where
> Brixtonian kitchens lard the late-dining air.

Again this is the double realism of the best urban poetry, a recognition of social relations and conditions and the ability to extend the scope of poetry to include the dingier areas of the city.

Another way in which he broadens the range of this popular genre in city poetry is by the inclusion of cockney colloquialisms in some of the poems. P. J. Keating has shown how the representation of London working-class speech became more realistic and less stylised at this period. In the work of Kipling who had lived with ordinary soldiers in India and absorbed the music-hall influence in London very thoroughly in writing his Barrack-Room Ballads (1892), there is a truer reflection of the idiom and sound-patterns of cockney speech than in earlier character-creations, usually fictional. At the same time Andrew Tuer was making systematic phonetic representations of cockney speech in The Kawkneigh Almanack

(1883), Thenks awf'lly (1890), and Old London Street Cries (1885).[5] Added to these influences works like the social investigations of Mayhew and Booth, the popularity of stories about the working-classes in East London, and the general recognition that the class had a voice to be heard through the developing socialist structures and we see why Henley saw fit to include cockney slang in his poems. This was by no means an act of pure opportunism; his genuine interest in the subject can be testified by his contribution to work on a dictionary of Slang and its Analogues during the 'nineties. A rendering of Villon in 'Villon's Straight Tip to all Cross Coves' consists almost entirely of cockney slang.

In London Types the colloquialisms help to create a more realistic texture than in similar work by Locker-Lampson or the Smith Brothers, but the perspective is still entirely middle-class, in fact the slang is presented in such a way as to make it more so. For it is isolated in italics and the effect is of an alien intrusion which makes the 'types' who use it seem even more of an amusing oddity than if it had been omitted. Kipling and Davidson followed the tradition of urban folk-song and the music-hall in allowing the characters to speak for themselves, but in Henley the narrator is still the poet and the effect is patronising. Remembering Buchanan's account of how he had worked to find the right language to present people like 'Liz', and recognising how far he was successful, Henley's 'Liza' in the poem 'Hammersmith' shows all the restrictions of the poem's context:

> 'LIZA's *old man* 's perhaps a little *shady*,
> 'LIZA's *old woman* 's prone to *booze* and cringe;
> But 'LIZA deems herself a *perfect lady*,
> And proves it in her feathers and her fringe.
> For 'LIZA has a *bloke* her heart to cheer,

With pearlies and a barrer and a jack,
So all the vegetables of the year
Are duly represented on her back.
Her boots are sacrifices to her hats,
Which knock you speechless - like a load of bricks!
Her summer velvets dazzle WANSTEAD FLATS,
And cost, at times, a good eighteen-and-six.
Withal, outside the gay and giddy whirl,
'LIZA's a stupid, straight, hard-working girl.[6]

The poetry of John Davidson is firmly in the tradition of 'proletarian sympathies'. He knew what it was to struggle to keep a family on a low income in the dreariness of the big city. In The Triumph of Mammon written in 1907 he declared that nine-tenths of his time in London had been wasted in the endeavour to earn a livelihood. He was known for his tough bargaining in the Grub Street world in which he attempted to earn this livelihood. J. B. Townsend, Davidson's chief biographer, cites a letter to the editor of the London Illustrated News to the effect that his price would stay at four guineas a poem, for William Watson got five and he was only about a guinea ahead of him in reputation![7] The poem 'Thirty Bob a Week' was no condescension but, like Thomas Hood's poetry which sprang partly out of his own experience, an imaginative extension of what he himself was living through.

'Thirty Bob a Week' first appeared in The Yellow Book in 1894. Although it may have been influenced by Kipling's Barrack Room Ballads, two years earlier, Davidson's own volume, In a Music-Hall and Other Poems (1891) shows that he was already acquainted with the idom of the music-hall and that he could include in his poetry the mundane details of everyday life. The prologue to the poem, 'In a Music-Hall' describes Davidson's own life during the eighties:

In Glasgow, in 'Eighty-four,
I worked as a junior clerk;
My masters I never could please,
But they tried me a while at the desk.

From ten in the morning till six
I wrote memorandums and things.
I indexed the letter-books too,
When the office-boy wasn't about.

And nothing could please me at night -
No novels, no poems, no plays,
Hardly the talk of my friends,
Hardly my hopes, my ambition.

I did as my desk-fellows did;
With a pipe and a tankard of beer,
In a music-hall, rancid and hot,
I lost my soul night after night.

It is better to lose one's soul,
Than never to stake it at all.

There are six characters in the music-hall sequence, singers, a dancer and a comedian, and each has his or her own separate poem. In presenting them we see Davidson stretching poetry to include something close to the language of an actual music-hall number. No poem quite becomes one or even an imitation of one, because each is still <u>about</u> the music-hall. 'Tom Jenks', second in the sequence, illustrates where Davidson stands in relation to the character: he begins by describing the appearance, though in the first person, and slips easily into music-hall slang. By using the first person he has avoided any suggestion of condescension, and at the same time he has allowed the character a superior knowledge to the reader: he has to explain to us what the terms mean. This tone of patient explanation on the part of the speaker is also used in 'Thirty Bob a Week' and it does a great deal to give dignity to the character.

From 'Tom Jenks'

A fur-collared coat and a stick and a ring,
And a chimney-pot hat to the side - that's me!
I'm a music-hall singer that never could sing:
I'm a sort of a fellow like that, do you see?

I go pretty high in my line, I believe,
Which is comic, and commonplace, too, maybe.
I was once a job-lot, though, and didn't receive
The lowest price paid in the biz., do you see?

For I never could get the right hang of the trade;
So the managers wrote at my name, 'D.B.,'
In the guide-books they keep of our business and grade,
Which means - you'll allow me - damned bad, do you see?

Of 'Thirty Bob a Week' itself, T. S. Eliot wrote that it was the poem in which Davidson freed himself completely from the poetic diction of English verse in his time. He went on to say:

> But I am sure that I found inspiration in the content of the poem, and in the complete fitness of content and idiom: for I also had a good many dingy urban images to reveal. Davidson had a great theme, and also found an idiom which elicited the greatness of the theme, which endowed this thirty-bob-a-week clerk with a dignity that would not have appeared if a more conventional poetic diction had been employed. The personage that Davidson created in this poem has haunted me all my life, and the poem is to me a great poem for ever.[8]

Part of the success of the idiom which endows the clerk with such dignity lies in the speaker's attitude to the imagined audience. It begins with a polite sentiment to the effect that he hopes the listener is better off than he is:

I couldn't touch a stop and turn a screw,
And set the blooming world a-work for me,
Like such as cut their teeth - I hope, like you -
On the handle of a skeleton gold key;
I cut mine on a leek, which I eat it every week:
I'm a clerk at thirty bob as you can see.

He then goes on, addressing the listener as 'sir' to explain the conditions of his life, his underground journey to and from work, his cramped suburban home, the fact that his wife takes in sewing. Next he allows his audience a glimpse of personal sentiment which is quickly suppressed, then followed by the notion that he is in Hell. In the stanza immediately following this revelation of emotion he addresses the listener with something approaching contempt. The latter now emerges as a member of the cultured, literary middle-classes. An echo from Sir Philip Sidney suggests that he might even be a poet. The publication of this poem in The Yellow Book would make for some irony if this is the case.

But you never hear her do a growl or whine,
For she's made of flint and roses, very odd;
And I've got to cut my meaning rather fine,
Or I'd blubber, for I'm made of greens and sod:
So p'r'aps we are in Hell for all that I can tell,
And lost and damn'd and served up hot to God.

I ain't blaspheming, Mr Silver-tongue;
I'm saying things a bit beyond your art:
Of all the rummy starts you ever sprung,
Thirty bob a week's the rummiest start!
With your science and your books and your the'ries
about spooks,
Did you ever hear of looking in your heart?

The poem's dignity also lies in its movement between the clerk's extremities of emotion, leaving the final impression of strong feelings held in check. Here he describes the violent anger

experienced by the economically oppressed, combined with the helpless sensation of having been fooled:

> I step into my heart and there I meet
> A god-almighty devil singing small,
> Who would like to shout and whistle in the street,
> And squelch the passers flat against the wall;
> If the whole world was a cake he had the power to take,
> He would take it, ask for more, and eat it all.
>
> And I meet a sort of simpleton beside,
> The kind that life is always giving beans;
> With thirty bob a week to keep a bride
> He fell in love and married in his teens;
> At thirty bob he stuck; but he knows it isn't luck:
> He knows the seas are deeper than tureens.

Throughout the poem he rejects the idea that he is a mere victim of circumstances since his self-respect demands the belief that he wills his existence and has done since his birth. There are three stanzas in which he describes his sense of total responsibility for his destiny and in them the language almost drops the cockney idiom, though not quite. Towards the end of the poem, however, it returns but this time with a conviction and eloquence in which the colloquial phraseology is emphasised by repetition and internal rhyme. We can see here why Eliot said that Davidson had found an idiom which 'elicited the greatness of the theme'; this stanza follows a reference to the phrase 'Thy will be done':

> They say it daily up and down the land
> As easy as you take a drink, it's true;
> But the difficultest go to understand,
> And the difficultest job a man can do,
> Is to come it brave and meek with thirty bob a week,
> And feel that that's the proper thing for you.

The eloquence of these lines is such that the language of common urban man can now be said to have taken its place in the literary world.

When Davidson first came to London from Scotland he became known as the poet of the oppressed, bringing to the readership of The Speaker and the Star glimpses of life unknown to them. He once visited the Rhymers' Club together with a few other Scots who made their impatience with the dreamy world of Yeats and Dowson clearly felt. Davidson told Dowson that his most highly esteemed poem - 'I have been faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion' - lacked 'blood and guts' and urged Yeats to try to make his work more masculine. To the middle-classes he must have carried with him the whiff of proletarian revolution. Passages in his Fleet Street Eclogues, 1893 and 1896, state why the city can be seen as Hell; he sees the social structure built on injustice and oppression. In these lines he has adopted Blake's use of paired nouns as in 'London' and the impact is similarly forceful:

> Help, ere it drive us mad, this devil's din!
> The clash of iron and the clink of gold;
> The quack's, the beggar's whining manifold;
> The harlot's whisper, tempting men to sin;
> The voice of priests who damn each other's missions;
> The babel-tongues of foolish politicians,
> Who shout around a swaying government;
> The groans of beasts of burden, mostly men,
> Who toil to please a thankless upper ten ...
>
> ('St Swithin's Day')

A little later, in 'St George's Day', one of the journalists in the poem explains that when his colleagues hear birds singing, 'I hear the idle workman sigh: / I hear his hungry children cry.' For him the city dispels all pastoral thoughts:

I cannot see the stars and flowers,
Nor hear the lark's soprano ring.
Because a ruddy darkness lowers
For ever, and the tempests sing.
I see the strong coerce the weak,
And labour overwrought rebel;
I hear the useless treadmill creak,
The prisoner, cursing in his cell;
I see the loafer-burnished wall;
I hear the rotting match-girl whine;
I see the unslept switchman fall;
I hear the explosion in the mine;
I see along the heedless street
The sandwichmen trudge through the mire;
I hear the tired quick tripping feet
Of sad, gay girls who ply for hire.

Both series of Fleet Street Eclogues represent the city as an infernal world from which the journalists long to escape to the country ('Heaven it is to tread unpaven ground') and the poems have as much pastoral description as they had urban. The lines on the city, however, show the vigour which comes of social indignation; the nouns used have a relationship to each other which creates more vitality than in the descriptions of fields and flowers. And the need to present the city directly has forced Davidson to take more trouble with his language. We see this process at work in the opening poem, 'A Ballad in Blank Verse of the Making of a Poet', to a volume published between the two series of Fleet Street Eclogues, entitled Ballads and Songs (1894), which contains his best poetry. The 'Ballad in Blank Verse' is autobiographical. If we compare the description of the outer waters of the sea-port with the account of the more urban part of the port, we see a contrast between language in which the diction is 'poetic' to the point of archaisms, and language which is charged with vitality:

The foam-embroidered firth, a purple path
For argosies that still on pinions speed,
Or fiery-hearted cleave with iron limbs
And bows precipitous the pliant sea ...

where hammers clang
On iron hulls, and cranes in harbours creak
Rattle and swing, whole ~~harbours~~ cargoes on their necks;
Where men sweat gold that others hoard ~~and~~ or spend,
And lurk like vermin in their narrow streets.

The language here is more vigorous and visually imaginative, very much in the manner of Alexander Smith with whom Davidson had links as a young man through John Nichol, then a professor at Glasgow University, but it also shows a more daring use of 'unpoetic' diction than even Smith achieved. Note in the above lines the stress that the enjambement gives to the words 'creak / Rattle and swing'.

Davidson was attracted to the energy of the city while being repelled by its social conditions. As in Symons, though for quite different reasons and with an entirely different frame of reference, his work reflects conflict - a desire to escape, together with the sense that the city offers a challenge which he must take up. In the prologue to 'In a Music-Hall' we saw the poet abandoning the ambitions contained in books in order to share the amusements of his colleagues, and in 'Thirty Bob a Week' there is the assertion that the speaker's lot has in some sense been chosen, while he shows no desire to be one of the 'Mr Silver-tongues'. A strange poem, 'A Ballad of a Workman' presents a worker dropping his ambitions to escape the city through individual fame, and returning to equality with his fellow industrial workers:

I drop the ~~fame~~ dream of high renown:
A nameless private in the strife;
Life, take me; take me, clanging town;
And death, the eager zest of life.

'The hammered anvils reel and chime;
The breathless, belted wheels ring true;
The workmen join the ends of time,
And forge and mould the world anew.'

These lines look like a declaration of solidarity and an assertion of working-class collective supremacy, but the 'strife' is not the class struggle and the worker is submitting simply to his destiny. The poem is a reflection of the fact that all Davidson's class instincts made him identify with the urban proletariat, but he had no sympathy with the ideology which was increasingly aiming to 'secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their labour'. He was in fact opposed to socialism seeing it as only another form of the Christianity which he had rejected. But his identification with many of the movement's attitudes was such that he was able to contribute willingly to The New Age, considering it an excellent publication, for some time before he realised in horror that its aims were largely socialist!

In all literary matters his views were radical and his energies directed towards a broadening of the social scope of poetry. He complained that much nineteenth century poetry was literary (or 'Shakespearean', as he put it) and placed his allegiances in the line of Burns, Blake and Thomas Hood:

> It is not now to the light that 'the passionate heart of the poet' will turn. The poet is in the street, the hospital. He intends the world to know it is out of joint. He will not let it alone. Democracy is here; and we have to go through with it. The newspaper is one of the most potent forces in moulding the character of contemporary poetry. Burns's eyes were open; Blake's perhaps, for a time; and Wordsworth had true insight into the true character of man and the world; but the rest saw men as trees walking;

> Tennyson and Browning are Shakespearean. The prismatic cloud that Shakespeare hung out between poets and the world! It was the newspapers that brought about what may be called the order of pre-Shakespeareanism. It was in the newspapers that Thomas Hood found the 'Song of the Shirt' - in its place the most important English poem of the nineteenth century; the 'woman in unwomanly rags plying her needle and thread' is the type of the world's misery. The 'Song of the Shirt' is the most terrible poem in the English language. Only a high heart and strong brain broken on the wheel of life, but master of its own pain and anguish, able to jest in the jaws of death, could have sung this song, of which every stanza wrings the heart. Poetry passed by on the other side. It could not endure the woman in unwomanly rags.[9]

His poetry has, therefore, an ideology, though it is not a political one, and it accounts both for the subjects selected and the point of view contained in the poems. In the lines from Fleet Street Eclogues quoted above is a reference to the 'loafer burnished wall'. The term 'loafer' was the word used by the late-Victorian middle-classes to describe the unemployed (cf. the modern use of the term 'idle' in a similar context). Davidson wrote a poem 'A Loafer' using again the first person but without the use of cockney colloquialisms. As a result there is a remoteness in the man's speech which accords with his general melancholy and estrangement. The poem has all the features of isolation in the urban context noted in Wordsworth and Thomson with the added distance caused by the people's conscious rejection of him. Here Davidson has produced lines which perpetuate and give a contemporary addition to the tradition of Blake, Wordsworth and Hood, combining strong, visual presentation, with imaginative sympathy:

I hang about the streets all day,
   All night I hang about;
I sleep a little when I may,
   But rise betimes the morning's scout;
For through the year I always hear
   Afar, aloft, a ghostly shout.

My clothes are worn to threads and loops;
   My skin shows here and there;
About my face like seaweed droops
   My tangled beard, my tangled hair;
From cavernous and shaggy brows
   My stony eyes untroubled stare.

I move from eastern wretchedness
   Through Fleet Street and the Strand;
And as the pleasant people press
   I touch them softly with my hand,
Perhaps to know that still I go
   Alive about a living land.

...

In Piccadilly spirits pass;
   Oh, eyes and cheeks that glow!
Oh, strength and comeliness! Alas,
   The lustrous health is earth I know
From shrinking eyes that recognise
   No brother in my rags and woe.

In order to come to an acceptance, an affirmation even, of the city as a subject, Davidson had to struggle with all the attitudes and preconceptions of a devout protestant background. He had none of the class problems which made him shrink from the urban masses, but he did see the city as the seat of vice, and realised how far in its reality it was from the Celestial City. There is a strong association between his decision to face up to the awful implications of a large city and his decision to reject the Christianity of his parents and 'choose damnation'. The infernal city somehow

becomes part of the damnation he has chosen. T. S. Eliot later said of Baudelaire that other urban poet who could embrace even the squalour and vice of the city, that he was 'man enough for damnation'. There may even be a direct connection: at the time when Davidson was choosing to lose his soul in a music-hall night after night ('It is better to lose one's soul / Than never to stake it at all') he was in contact with Swinburne whom he met through John Nichol and it was Swinburne who was the first to bring Baudelaire to an English audience, particularly the Baudelaire of unconventional spiritual choices.

When, in 'A Ballad in Blank Verse of the Making of a Poet', the poet rejects his father's religion he rejects his Book of Revelation heaven. The father, finally realising how his son has chosen, speaks as follows:

> Beside the crystal river I shall walk
> For ever with the Lord. The city of gold,
> The jasper walls thereof, the gates of pearl,
> The bright foundation-stones of emerald,
> Of sapphire, chrysoprase, of every gem,
> And the high triumph of unending day
> Shall be but wildfire on a summer eve
> Beside the exceeding glory of delight,
> That shall entrance me with the constant thought
> Of how in Hell through all eternity
> My son performs the perfect will of God.

The son afterwards describes his father's religion as dull, with 'A useless Hell, a jewel-huckster's heaven'. Here is the imagery of the Heavenly City being belittled and thoroughly despised for its commercial richness, for all the world as if it were Vanity Fair! If his father's Hell seemed dull, he had available to him a vivid rendering of what might be Hell in Thomson's <u>The City of</u>

Dreadful Night, of which he was a great admirer, saying it should be read more widely. The poem provided him with a language and imagery for his basic conceptions of the city as we see in the poem 'A Ballad of The Exodus from Houndsditch' which appeared in Ballads and Songs (1894).

Davidson has picked up a sentiment of Carlyle's from his journals quoted by Froude in 1884:

> Exodus from Houndsditch. 'That alas is impossible as yet, though it is the gist of all writings and wise books, I sometimes think - the goal to be wisely aimed at as the first of all for us. Out of Houndsditch, indeed! Ah, were we but out, and had our own along with us.'[10]

By the exodus from Houndsditch Carlyle meant the sloughing of Judeo-Christian superstition, symbolised in the Jewish second-hand clothes markets of Houndsditch. Davidson has taken both the symbolic and actual features of Houndsditch to produce an allegory of the city based on the city's real nature. The poem concerns an evangelical preacher who rails against the vice and corruption of the city, declaring that if the people don't believe him before they die, they 'shall believe in Hell'. He hears all round him the multitudinous din of the city like a tide and a phantom leads him to Houndsditch. The fog falls and Davidson's description takes on a fin de siècle quality with vivid, twisted imagery:

> A vapour sank, ill-smelling and unclean,
> Over the orient city; and writhed and curled
> Up Houndsditch like a mist in a ravine
> Of some fantastic world,
>
> Where wild weeds, half-way down the frowning bank,
> Flutter like poor apparel stained and sere,
> And lamplike flowers with hearts of flame their rank
> And baleful blossoms rear.

Nothing he noted of the ceaseless roar
Of wheels and wearied hoofs and wearied feet,
That sounded hoarse behind 'twixt shore and shore
Of brimming Aldgate Street.

Then comes a description of the crowd, among them a young man carrying a cross which he throws into the depths below affording him great relief. The crowd is described in some detail but it is strictly allegorical as are the individual figures who appear in The City of Dreadful Night. They represent the movement of human history as Davidson sees it:

The king o'er-threw the priest; the folk did tame
The king; and, having nobly played the man,
Bowed to the yoke again, while God became
A sleek-haired Anglican.

Meanwhile the city has been transformed into two distinct parts, the roofs representing The Holy City, and the streets itself,

The reeking cess-pool of humanity,
The hideous nine-orbed Hell.

In the general rush out of Houndsditch many are trampled underfoot. Gradually the city fades and reveals nature and the sky:

Straightway a blood-red fog darkened and shone
And hid the street, ... Was it the crimson stain
Of morn alone? Or must the New Day dawn
O'er mountains of the slain?

The mist dissolved; Lo! Nature's comely face!
No Hellish sewer poisoning the air,
No parish Heaven obliterating space,
But earth and sky so fair -

Infinite thought, infinite galaxies ...

The preacher awakes to the winter fog, but dies of his vision, and the poem closes with the crowd's refusal to heed him seeming one with the general indifference of any London crowd. Urban 'reality'

has triumphed over the vision of Nature:

> Few marked his death amid the ceaseless roar
> Of wheels and wearied hoofs and wearied feet,
> That sounded hoarse behind 'twixt shore and shore
> Of brimming Aldgate Street.

I think it is because Davidson had a vision of the city, and because he was prepared to accept the worst implications of it that he is able to face it clearly in its everyday aspects. He is at home with the prosaic as much as with the apocalyptic, as his remarks in the prose passage quoted earlier would suggest. Several of his poems, such as 'The Isle of Dogs', 'Holiday at Hampton Court' and 'The Crystal Palace' are taken from his own journalistic writings on these subjects contributed to The Speaker or The Glasgow Herald. 'A Northern Suburb' (1896) has similarities to two prose pieces, 'A North London Suburb' and 'A Suburban Philosopher', both of which appeared in The Glasgow Herald in 1893. It is a poem worth quoting in full as an illustration of the low-keyed, factual approach entirely different from the visionary urgency of 'The Exodus from Houndsditch', showing the great range of urban poetry in Davidson's grasp. He is prepared to use the language of a housing survey or pamphlet, as in the fourth stanza, and to give a straightforward statement of the limited aspirations of the suburb's inhabitants as well as describing the appearance of the place. With its combination of the simple quatrain to convey a breadth of vision finally narrowing to the restrictions of actuality he looks well forward into the twentieth century, anticipating the poets of the 1930s. Not only the imagery, but the pamphlet language, too, prefigures Auden or MacNeice:

> Nature selects the longest way,
> And winds about in tortuous grooves;
> A thousand years the oaks decay;
> The wrinkled glacier hardly moves.

But here the whetted fangs of change
Daily devour the old demesne -
The busy farm, the quiet grange,
The wayside inn, the village green.

In gaudy yellow brick and red,
With rooting pipes, like creepers rank,
The shoddy terraces o'erspread
Meadow, and garth, and daisied bank.

With shelves for rooms the houses crowd,
Like draughty cupboards in a row -
Ice-chests when wintry winds are loud,
Ovens when summer breezes blow.

Roused by the fee'd policeman's knock,
And sad that day should come again,
Under the stars the workmen flock
In haste to reach the workmen's train.

For here dwell those who must fulfil
Dull tasks in uncongenial spheres,
Who toil through dread of coming ill,
And not with hope of happier years -

The lowly folk who scarcely dare
Conceive themselves perhaps misplaced,
Whose prize for unremitting care
Is only not to be disgraced.

Finally, a less objective account of a suburb, one where emotion informs the landscape. It is in the poem 'A Woman and her Son' which comes in the same volume as 'A Northern Suburb' (New Ballads, 1897). The son attends his mother's death-bed. While she is waiting for him to come, her dreariness and pain is accompanied by all the familiar images of a suburban evening. T. S. Eliot said that he found Davidson's blank verse rather hard going, but these lines must surely have influenced him:

The workingmen with heavy iron tread,
The thin-shod clerks, the shopmen neat and plump,

Home from the city came. On muddy beer
The melancholy mean suburban street
Grew maudlin for an hour; pianos waked
In dissonance from dreams of rusty peace,
And unpitched voices quavered tedious songs
Of sentiment inform or nerveless mirth....

...And when the hour of gaiety had passed,
And the poor revellers were gone to bed,
The moon among the chimneys wandering long
Escaped at last, and sadly overlooked
The waste raw land where doleful suburbs thrive.

As in the quarrel with the father, the son in this poem is unable to conform with his mother's piety. When she dies his feelings are not described at all except through the 'objective correlative' provided by the city:

He set his teeth, and saw his mother die.
Outside a city-reveller's tipsy tread
Severed the silence with a jagged rent;
The tall lamps flickered through the sombre street,
With yellow light hiding the stainless stars:
In the next house a child awoke and cried;
Far off a clank and clash of shunting trains
Broke out and ceased, as if the fettered world
Started and shook its irons in the night;
Across the dreary common citywards,
The moon, among the chimneys sunk again,
Cast on the clouds a shade of smoky pearl.[11]

Davidson is here developing the techniques already observed in Alexander Smith who uses the city for the same emotional situation. But he is also, whether he intended it or not, the true descendant of Baudelaire. He has linked the eternal with the details of the city's passing moments, in a way which other fin de siècle writers attempted but never really achieved. For Davidson's contemporary world was that of the class who were beginning to take a more and

more dominant role in the making of events. The 'heroism of modern life' was no longer the life of cafés, dancers, and the fog-dimmed lights of the embankment, but of working-men, clerks and shopmen, street pianos, beer, and the cry of a child in the house next door. It was in chronicling these that Davidson brought urban poetry into the twentieth century.

Notes to Chapter Eight

1. W. E. Henley, 'Charles Dickens', Views and Reviews, (London, 1890).
2. See J. H. Buckley, William Ernest Henley, (Princeton, 1945).
3. W. E. Henley, 'Hood', op. cit.
4. Arthur Symons, 'Mr Henley's Poetry', Fortnightly Review, August 1892.
5. P. J. Keating, The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction, (London, 1971).
6. W. E. Henley, Poems, (London, 1921).
7. For this, and most of the other biographical details in this chapter, see J. B. Townsend, John Davidson: Poet of Armageddon, (Yale, 1961).
8. T. S. Eliot, Preface to John Davidson, A Selection of his Poems, edited by Maurice Lindsay, (London, 1961).
9. John Davidson, A Rosary, (London, 1903).
10. Quoted as an epigraph to the poem in Ballads and Songs (London, 1894), though to the detriment of the poem omitted by Turnbull except as part of an explanation in the Notes.
11. The Poems of John Davidson, edited by Andrew Turnbull, (Edinburgh, 1973).

CHAPTER NINE

TOWARDS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Do you know that the stucco is peeling?
Do you know that the heart will stop?
From those yellow Italianate arches
Do you hear the plaster drop?

(from 'Death in Leamington' by John Betjeman)

In 1909 in his prose work, London - A Book of Aspects, Arthur Symons acknowledged the place of Henley and Davidson in the poetry of London, 'of the men of our time only Henley and John Davidson have loved it or struck music out of it.' But he writes this in the context of a general lament for the lack of poetry about the subject: 'in London we have had nothing like the time of Victor Hugo, when Baudelaire and Gautier and Gerard de Nerval and men of obscure and vagabond genius made Paris vital, a part of themselves, a form of creative literature', and he goes on to wish also that there was a Walt Whitman for London, for 'it is only in Whitman that the paving stones really speak with a voice as authentic as the voice of the hills.'[1]

In A Rosary six years earlier Davidson had urged a return to the poetry of Hood, the poetry of the street and the newspaper. Five years later, in contributions to The Egoist Richard Aldington was advocating that poets learn from the Futurists to experiment with language and form in order to be able to deal with modern urban subject-matter, for 'it is ridiculous and dull to write of Hampstead Heath or of a tramcar in the language and metre which served to express the soul of Tennyson or Congreve.' With reference to

Robert Frost's North of Boston he concludes, 'I recognise in Mr Frost a poet who has done for his part of America in his own way what we want done for London in ours.'[2]

Among the Imagist poets at this time there was in fact a good deal of poetry being produced about the city, most of it very mediocre. It was part of the way they stressed their difference from the mildly bucolic work of the Georgians and showed their cosmopolitanism. Both French and American influences at that time pointed in the direction of urban poetry. J. G. Fletcher, F. S. Flint, Aldington himself, H. D. and Amy Lowell all had London poems in The Egoist and in their own volumes. In these they frequently seem to be trying to follow the advice of Aldington about finding new modes of expression, but the result is all too often a gush of confused impressions, deriving from the same models as were used by the fin de siècle poets but crying out for some of their craftsmanship, and adding to the influences of Baudelaire or Verlaine those of the more recent French vers libristes. The theoretical restrictions of Flint and Pound as set out in the 'imagist' issue of Poetry (Chicago) in 1913 seem to have been ignored (as has the similar stylistic disciplines of Vorticism): the need for clear images, laconic diction, sparse vocabulary, all aiming at concentrated poetry of the 'first intensity'. Instead there is a tendency towards the Futurist fallacy of imitative form. J. G. Fletcher's 'Bus-Top', from a series called 'London Excursion II', is a typical list of impressions and sensations:

> Black shapes bending,
> Taxi cabs crush in the crowd.
>
> The tops are each a shining square
> Shuttles that steadily press through woolly fabric.
> Drooping blossom,

Gas-standards over
Spray out jingling tumult
Of white-hot rays.

Monotonous domes of bowler-hats
Vibrate in the heat.

Silently, easily we sway through braying traffic,
Down the crowded street,
The tumult crouches over us,
Or suddenly drifts to one side.[3]

The general attitude of these poets towards the city is one of febrile anxiety. There is a distaste for the subject-matter but a feeling at the same time that it must be positively siezed upon as poetic material. Aldington wrote of Flint that he would be doing a service to his readers in writing successful urban poetry: 'if he succeeds in reconciling us with a forced existence in this gloomy market-prison-metropolis he will have accomplished a very difficult and admirable task.' A poem by H. D. claims that because men were unable to grasp the beauty of cities in the past, they have been put into hideous cells to await the new city of the future. It is almost the only poem of this period that sees that cities have been and may still be, beautiful; but the present is dreary:

Can we believe - by any effort
comfort our hearts:
it is not waste all this,
not placed here in disgust,
street after street,
each patterned alike,
no grace to lighten
a single house of the hundred
crowded into one garden space.[4]

Perhaps the most straightforward expression of dislike for the city comes in a poem by R. B. Glaenzer in the April 1915 issue of The Egoist. He calls it 'Misopolite':

I am a hater of cities:
The roar and hum and whirr of them
And their smoke,
Saved when brushed into magic
By Whistler.
I am a hater of cities:
The gloom and filth and stench of them
And their life,
Save in my memories of parks
Hushed in twilight,
Veiled by violet shadows
Or unreal with dawn.
I am a hater of cities:
I hate their stinking alleys ...[5]

Amidst the formless outpourings of this period a few poems by Pound stand out for a certain dry humour or clarity, such as his parody of Yeats's 'Lake Isle of Innisfree' in which he longs to keep a little tobacco shop, or the carefully overrefined image:

'In a Station of the metro'

The apparition of these faces in the crowd,
Petals on a wet black bough.

But the true inheritor of the urban tradition was, of course, T. S. Eliot, and to turn to him is to find again many of the contradictions of earlier poetry of the city but a great assurance about it as subject matter. Where his English contemporaries were gritting their teeth and asserting that they should write about it, Eliot showed himself completely at ease with the material. It was his 'home' both actually and in a literary sense. He once said that he could no more give up living in the city than he could give up smoking. The city was the repository of memories and associations of his own, while at the same time cities featured in the work with which he fed much of his imagination: the poetry of Dante, Baudelaire, James Thomson and the English poets of the fin de siècle.

His tribute to Davidson's 'Thirty Bob a Week' is written in such a way as to suggest that here he had found his spiritual home, echoing as it does, the cadences of the Twenty-Third Psalm: 'The personage that Davidson created in this poem has haunted me all my life, and the poem is to me a great poem for ever.' (cf. 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.') In Eliot we find many of the features of nineteenth century city poetry turned to advantage, including those which created difficulties for his predecessors; their struggles and achievements became his medium.

The urban crowd had, as we have seen, created one of the greatest problems, if it did not cause a poet to retreat from the material entirely, it often produced in turn a sense of isolation. The crowd plays a major part in Eliot's The Waste Land, where the first glimpse of the city is of the crowd going over London bridge. Eliot has overcome part of the problem of how to handle it by giving it a semi-symbolic role: in using the echo from Dante he is able to suggest that this, in its way, is Hell:

> Unreal City
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.

Madame Sosostris has already foreseen crowds of people, walking round in a ring, and the hooded hordes later feature in the final section as part of the apocalyptic destruction of cities. In the meantime Eliot has also adopted the method of Davidson (and through him, of Hood) in taking urban individuals out of the crowd for treatment, always keeping their urban setting in view. There is Stetson who has something buried in his garden, the highly-strung lady of 'The Game of Chess' who wants to rush out into the streets,

the speaker in the bar at closing time, the Smyrna merchant Mr Eugenides, the typist and her 'lover', the Thames daughters who echo Dante in describing their downfall. The speaker in the bar shows a development of Davidson's use of cockney idiom, possibly enhanced by Eliot's own love of the music-hall:

> You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
> (And her only thirty-one.)
> I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
> It's them pills, I took, to bring it off, she said.
> (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
> The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
> You <u>are</u> a proper fool, I said.

But while 'identifying' imaginatively as if, like Tiresias, he has 'foresuffered all', Eliot nevertheless keeps at an equal distance from all his urban types. The tone of the main 'voice' in the poem is that of the isolated outsider. We can recognise this as the unifying consciousness partly because of its consistent aloofness and interiorised brooding which is very similar to that of earlier poems, 'Preludes', 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Here Eliot is firmly in the tradition of the nineteenth century poets, but unlike those who were disconcerted by their estrangement and struggled to overcome it, such as Wordsworth, Buchanan or James Thomson, he seems to find freedom in it. At the same time he is acutely aware of his removal from his surroundings and from other people but is prepared to articulate it with a directness uncommon in his predecessors. He writes readily about the gulf between man and man or between his consciousness and the external world, as in

> There will be a time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet ...

or in 'Preludes'

> And when all the world came back
> And the light crept up between the shutters
> And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
> You had such a vision of the street
> As the street hardly understands;
> Sitting along the bed's edge, where
> You curled the papers from your hair,
> Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
> In the palms of both soiled hands.

Although on such occasions as these Eliot can write about the gap between the consciousness and the surrounding world, he is also a master at the art of interweaving the two in the manner of Baudelaire or Arthur Symons. Sometimes this is achieved through a certain looseness or ambiguity in the syntax, as in lines near the beginning of 'Prufrock',

> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And saw-dust restaurants with oyster-shells:
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
> Oh do not ask, 'What is it?'
> Let us go and make our visit.

In the progress of 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' the insomniac consciousness of the persona is communicated through images of the city at night which in their turn awaken memories. It is a disordered consciousness reflected in the twisted, distorted objects he observed. Tennyson had used the city in a similar way in 'Maud', and Thomson had taken the process of distortion to the point of transformation. Eliot also sometimes uses the 'reversed image' where an artificial or urban metaphor is used to communicate some

natural or human phenomenon, as in the opening of 'Prufrock':

> Let us go then, you and I,
> While the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table ...

or the image in The Waste Land:

> when the human engine waits
> Like a taxi throbbing waiting.

In 'Preludes' we are aware of a debate going on, not as to whether or not the city was subject matter for poetry, but an argument along the lines of that between Wordsworth and Coleridge as to the relation of man's mind to the circumambient universe. This is conducted entirely in relation to the city, and the final simile sums up a philosophical standpoint in an urban image:

> I am moved by fancies that are curled
> Around these images, and cling:
> The notion of some infinitely gentle
> Infinitely suffering thing.
>
> Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
> The worlds revolve like ancient women
> Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

In developing a Weltanschaung by means of the city, Eliot is once again taking his place in the tradition of both Baudelaire and James Thomson.

At other times the interpenetration of human consciousness and the urban environment is achieved simply by the evocation of urban images in the poet's meditations:

> With the other masquerades
> That time resumes,
> One thinks of all the hands,
> That are raising dingy shades
> In a thousand furnished rooms.

or from 'The Fire Sermon':

the nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs
are departed.

Eliot is in the tradition of urban poetry as it became established in the nineteenth century in another respect - its use as the objective correlative for a particular emotion. We have seen already that the city became associated with grief, or the sense of loss, partly because this landscape was itself capable of creating a sense of isolation and loneliness. I share the view that the poem is more than an expression of post-war accidie and that its unifying purpose is elegiac, that it originated in a personal loss. When writing of a mother's death, Davidson had described 'The raw waste land / Where doleful suburbs thrive' and here as in Alexander Smith, Thomson and Tennyson, Eliot would have had literary precedents for using the city as a correlative for grief, contrasting it as he does with images of spiritual vitality, the mountains, the depths of the sea, the well-handled boat on calm water.

But in spite of all the precedents and the evidence for seeing Eliot as part of the tradition of city poetry, he has achieved what his predecessors only occasionally had glimpses of - a language and form entirely appropriate to the material. Where they wrote about a fragmented world and broken relations in verse that by its very regularity gave it the appearance of order, Eliot presented it in fragmentary, irregular form. Only in the choruses to 'The Rock' where he is concerned with the re-building of civilisation in cities does he choose for the subject a form which works for coherence. But while his form is fragmented, his language is coherent to the

point of eloquence, and it is in this respect that he differs not only from most of the nineteenth century poets but also from those of his contemporaries mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

There had been considerable achievements towards a language for poetry of the city throughout the nineteenth century, as poets struggled against the kind of difficulties outlined in Chapter One. Hood and Buchanan by their very retaining of a certain classic neutrality of diction had given stature to the subject-matter and paved the way for such poems as Davidson's 'The Loafer' or 'Thirty Bob a Week'. James Thomson introduced not only symbolism but also rhetoric, and in this way he too provided a mode of expression for Davidson. But none of these has the eloquence which for me is the distinguishing feature of Eliot's early poetry. It is a mixture of the elegiac and celebratory and can convey not only the estranged and sorrowing mood which pervades The Waste Land but the delight of such lines as

> 'This music crept by me upon the waters'
> And long the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
> O City, city, I can sometimes hear
> Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
> The pleasant whining of a mandoline
> And a clatter and a chatter from within
> Where fishermen lounge at noon; where the walls
> Of Magnus Martyr hold
> Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

As well as his own basic iambic pentameter which he employs with numerous variations, he draws on European models and quotes some of the most eloquent lines of English poetry. It is significant I think that in his essay on Dante it is not a 'clear visual image' that he sees as the 'touchstone' but the line, 'In la sua voluntade è nostra pace'. In Eliot's urban poetry we have all the variety of

urban imagery established by his predecessors but in addition the linguistic achievement which they for various reasons, were not capable of. He is the first poet in English to write of the city in the lyric manner.

Writing about language in Four Quartets Eliot observes on more than one occasion that the right word and phrase for a subject will no longer be adequate for the demands of new material. In 'Little Gidding' he writes:

> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a
> beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph.

In some senses The Waste Land was the epitaph of nineteenth century urban poetry, at least of the kind of poetry which attempts to present the city as subject, rather than simply as background. In Eliot's own later work the city becomes subordinated to philosophical and theological speculation. In Four Quartets it provides a certain amount of Limbo imagery as well as that of the Inferno. The 'place of disaffection' in which the soul may find itself is a more abstract version of his earlier 'dingy urban images' with its vacant faces, waste paper and finally the naming of the location:

> Only a flicker
> Over the strained time-ridden faces
> Distracted from distraction by distraction
> Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
> Tumid apathy with no concentration
> Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
> That blows before and after time,
> Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
> Time before and time after.
> Eructation of unhealthy souls
> Into the faded air, the torpid
> Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills
> of London,

Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Camden and Putney,
Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate. Not here
Not here the darkness, in this twittering world.

The Dantesque figure who returns in 'Little Gidding' to 'streets I never thought I should revisit' to tell the poet some bitter facts about maturity is almost the epitome of all the haunted wanderers in dawn streets:

I met one walking, loitering and hurried
As if blown towards me like the metal leaves
Before the urban dawn wind unresisting.

The New Jerusalem or Celestial City scarcely features in Eliot's work, not even in 'The Rock'. Unlike some of his nineteenth century predecessors he has provided no affirmative city imagery, only the yearning regretful meditation of 'Preludes'.[6]

Anne Ridler was surely not alone when she found Eliot's language inimitable. In 'A Question of Speech' she writes, 'For myself I should say it was Eliot who first made me despair of becoming a poet.' If no English writer had written with such eloquence of the city before him, nor have any since. As the twentieth century took its course the problems which confronted earlier writers remained or worsened while perceptions and viewpoint changed. Pictorial art could no longer provide a means of mediation for it became increasingly abstract and structurally closer to the city as form. Poets now travelled in faster trains, in cars or even in aeroplanes and the poetry of the 'thirties reflects a broader and less imprisoned experience of the city. It becomes part of an industrial landscape both physically and conceptually. The poets would satirise this scene or deplore it ethically while at the same time they bravely attempted to affirm it historically.

Many of the strains in nineteenth century urban poetry remain, although their appearance tends to be sparse. John Betjeman with his nostalgia for the urban achievements of the Victorian middle-classes is a direct descendant of the Smith brothers and Locker-Lampson. The fin de siècle cult of the artificial finds its consummation in the Byzantium poems of Yeats. In one of the few attempts at lyrical evocation of urban subject-matter, George Barker's 'Battersea Park', we find the same need as in the Victorians to transform the material before it can be handled:

> Now it is November and mist wreathes the trees,
> The horses cough their white blooms in the street,
> Dogs shiver and boys run; the barges on the Thames
> Lie like leviathans in the fog; and I meet
> A world of lost wonders as I loiter in the haze
> Where fog and sorrow cross my April days.

A few of the more successful nineteenth century city poets were Scots or wrote about a Scottish city: Alexander Smith, Buchanan, Thomson, Henley and Davidson. Their ability to tackle urban subject matter can sometimes be accounted for by the sharp moral perspective on the city provided by the protestant tradition, but also by the less threatening nature of cities in Scotland where the horizon would still include the natural line of mountains and the relation of city to hinterland was clear. For similar reasons the twentieth century has seen the emergence of the provincial town as a poetic subject, as for example, Louis Macneice's 'Carrickfergus' or Francis Scarfe's 'Tyne Dock', and the Liverpool poetry of Adrian Henri, Brian Patten and Roger McGough. The latter group are most interesting for their development of the colloquial urban speech of their region. This comes partly from Ginsberg and the 'beat poets' by whom they are influenced, but also from the fact that their

poetry was written to be 'performed' in pubs and folk clubs, and for this reason they seem to be as much in the music-hall tradition as with the American descendants of Whitman.

The urgency with which the poets of the 1840s and later of the '80s and '90s searched for a language to express the city has not returned. Modern poets have inherited from Hood, Buchanan, Symons, Davidson and Eliot the ability to handle urban themes but they do so without their predecessors' belief in the importance of such themes. Poetry about the natural world has maintained its popularity as has love poetry, but not the poetry of the city. Philip Larkin's 'Deceptions', for example, is based on an extract from Meyhew and the life of the London streets forms a background to the incident described. The poet can write without self-consciousness of the man who bursts into 'fulfillment's desolate attic', but in the end the poem is not about existence in London, either past or contemporary, but about different kinds of deception. And so it is with most twentieth century poetry written by men and women living in cities. The nineteenth century poets had often shown man struggling against being lost or effaced by the overwhelming city; perhaps the choice of twentieth century poets is to make the city itself invisible.

Notes to Chapter Nine

1. Arthur Symons, London - A Book of Aspects, (London, 1909), p. 47.
2. Richard Aldington, Review in The Egoist, July 1, 1914.
3. J. G. Fletcher, 'Bus-Top', The Egoist, July 15, 1914.
4. 'H. D.', 'Cities', The Egoist, July 1, 1916.
5. R. B. Glaenzer, 'Misopolite', The Egoist, April 1, 1915.
6. T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962, (London, 1963).
7. Anne Ridler, 'A Question of Speech', Focus Three, quoted in The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse, (1950), p. 205.

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(Where I have found it useful to work from both original editions and later collections of an author's work, as for example in the case of John Davidson, I have listed both. Books of the Bible and individual novels of Dickens are not included, but their influence on nineteenth century urban poetry was pervasive. The place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.)

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